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## Coming To Terms With Distraction In German

[This article represents work in progress on a larger book project, historicising, defining and comparing modes of distraction in European literature. None of it has been submitted for publication or presented orally so far. The article covers most of the key definitions and several of the key authors on the German side of the project: this focus reflects my research as Sylvia Naish Post-doctoral Research Fellow in Germanic Studies at the IGRS in 2009.]

**Distraction** in English is associated with any of four concepts that may coincide in different combinations but which are denoted in separate terms in German (and also in the Romance languages). I am seeking in my research on modelling distraction in European literature to historicise, compare and analyse significant examples of distraction as it is understood in English through making connections between modes of distraction that have tended to be treated differently in the languages of their original presentation. I define distraction in literature as *the reconfiguration of awareness by authors, readers and protagonists where objects or impulses divert them from norms of conceptualisation to focus on alternative connections*. Significant complication is posed for Anglophone readers of German by *Zerstreuung*, the most broadly connoted of the terms usually rendered as ‘distraction’, and one which by its nature resists being pinned down. *Zerstreuung* has been appropriated inconsistently as its meaning has evolved; and its translation as ‘distraction’ is not as straightforward as some of its users have arbitrarily assumed. Furthermore, the proliferation of commentary on *Zerstreuung* alone should not eclipse the substantial insight into distraction in its multiple configurations that a balanced consideration of those forms that are not obviously translatable as *Zerstreuung* (and *Zerstreuungtheit*, which is sometimes but not always coterminous) will provide. These forms are signified by *Ablenkung* (diversion; often synonymous with *Zerstreuung*), *Verstörung* (mental disturbance), *Unaufmerksamkeit* (inattention) and *Unruhe* (disquiet). In the following, I shall explore some of the manifestations of conditions of distraction as they are presented in a selection of German literature and thought, to support the central hypothesis that my larger project will attempt to prove: that *for readers, authors and protagonists, textual mediations of distraction mirror the social function of literature, in engendering reflection and expression in a space between perception and experience*. This investigation represents work in progress on a project that will compare the dynamics

of distraction in English, French and German. The comparison will be undertaken not only through the historicisation which I shall present selectively here, drawing on philosophy and critical theory, but also through close analysis of modern literary texts that exemplify and extend the modes of distraction to which it is hoped the overview below will attune the reader.

Further terms beyond the primary signifiers above that are semantically associated with distraction also tend to differ in English and German. I would contend that our understanding of distraction depends on the extent to which we emphasise either the negative prefix 'di(s)-' or the sense of 'traction' – albeit etymologically coincidental – with or without another prefix (especially *attraction* and *abstraction*). On the other hand, *Lenkung*, *Störung*, *Aufmerksamkeit*, *Ruhe* and, above all, *Streuung* all convey sensations that are not so obviously integral to the English understanding of distraction. Furthermore, *distraction* and *Zerstreuung* have each evolved considerably beyond the restricted context in which they originated. *Distraction* and *Zerstreuung* were taken in the late Middle Ages from the Latin *distractio*-, denoting a state of being drawn apart, in particular from God.<sup>1</sup> In its adoption from the outset of 'traction' from the Latin verb 'trahere' (*to draw, drag*), English has foregrounded locomotion – a term that becomes a useful intermediary for connecting distraction to the condition of the *flâneur*, or idler, comparable to the sense of 'streunen' that links the *Streuner* to *Zerstreuung* in German.

### **Distraction in Mind: *Verstörung***

In modelling distraction as a condition of mind, we must grapple with two problems that relate to the illusion of transparency in codified signification. One of these problems is of the modelling and terming of discrete phenomena in flows of discourses and of the concerns of those discourses. The dangers of modelling the mind have been pointed out for psychiatry by Miriam Siegler and Humphry Osmond, who warn that 'modern medicine postulates eight clearly differentiated models for mental illness', which are almost cognate with distraction in themselves, being merely 'abstractions. They are inventions of the

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of how *Zerstreuung*, cognate with *Zerstreuung*, represented a social view of the non-conformist individual in learned society prior to the Enlightenment are provided by Gadi Algazi in 'Gelehrte Zerstreuung und gelehrte Vergeßlichkeit: Bemerkungen zu ihrer Rolle in der Herausbildung des Gelehrtenhabitus', <<http://www.tau.ac.il/~algazi/texts/Zerstreuung.pdf>> (originally in Peter van Moos, ed., *Der Fehltritt: Vergehen und Versehen in der Vormoderne*. Cologne: Böhlau, 2001, pp. 235-50). This and all subsequently cited internet sources were consulted on 6 November 2009.

human mind to place facts, events, and theories in an orderly manner. They are not necessarily true or false.<sup>2</sup> Applying this observation to literary studies, the Germanist Sander L. Gilman succinctly summarises these models as ‘ordering principles, nothing more, nothing less’;<sup>3</sup> they are anchors around which we might orientate ourselves in the context of flows between any number of points constellated in the sum total of these models. While the kind of ‘flow’ that Gilman identifies derives from the psychological mode of positively focused mental operation distinguished by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi,<sup>4</sup> the flow of modern media streams will prove equally relevant to us when we come to relate distraction to patterns of entertainment and attention. The dangers of arbitrarily assigning models apply, I would argue, beyond psychiatry, and certainly within what German appositely terms the *Geisteswissenschaften*, which signify the workings of the mind in a somewhat more arbitrary juxtaposition with a putative “knowledge-scape” than the explicitly humanist *humanities* in the English language. The second problem is of euphemism, which, although fundamental to distraction as more than a mental state, is especially resonant for the Anglophone reader. Analysis of *distraction* in its early English literary usage needs to draw considerably on the development of the adjective *distraught*, a modification of *distrac*.<sup>5</sup> *Distraction* in the Renaissance era covered a spectrum of mental conditions;<sup>6</sup> today, set expressions – most commonly ‘to be driven to distraction’ –

<sup>2</sup> Siegler & Osmond, *Models of Madness, Models of Medicine*. London: MacMillan, 1974, p. xviii. Alongside the medical model, they compare the moral model, the impaired model, the psychoanalytic model, the social model, the psychedelic model, the conspiratorial model and the family interaction model.

<sup>3</sup> Gilman, ‘On The Use and Abuse of the History of Psychiatry for Literary Studies’. *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 52:3 (Sept. 1978), 381-399 (p. 381).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Csíkszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper Row, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Notable usages, both from about 1591, are to be found in Edmund Spenser’s sonnets ‘The Ruin[e]s of Time’ (a translation of Joaquim Du Bellay’s sonnet cycle *Les Antiquités de Rome* [1558]): ‘And I in mind remained sore aghast | distraught twixt fear and pity’ (*The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, Vol. 5. Edinburgh: Nichol, 1866, p. 22); and in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, in a speech delivered to the King by his brother the Duke of Gloucester in Act III, Scene V: ‘As if thou wert distraught and mad with terror’ (Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. Janis Lull. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 199). In his German translation of this play (1810), A. W. Schlegel – who, as we shall shortly note, was familiar with the possibilities for translating distraction from the French – renders the first of Shakespeare’s adjectives as ‘außer dir’ (‘wie außer dir und irr im Geist vor Schrecken’: in Shakespeare, *Dramatische Werke*, Vol. 3. Berlin: Reimer, 1840, p. 309). Schlegel thus underlines separation in spirit, as well as the division between the form of distraction that is denoted by *Verstörung*, or becoming distraught, and full-blown insanity.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness And Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), who chooses ‘distraction’ as her key term for conditions of madness and melancholy as it reflects attitudes of the period she surveys ‘toward madness as a temporary derailing’ (p. 2). The labels ‘Early Modern’ and ‘modern’ in relation to historical periods cannot always be applied compatibly when we draw upon critical studies produced at different times and in different disciplines. Central to my study is the Modernist thought that came to prominence in the early twentieth century, during which multiple forms of distraction emerged as significant topoi. For the purposes of the present study, ‘early modernism’ would most logically designate the precedence of nineteenth-century French culture for the German Modernist criticism spearheaded by Walter Benjamin. This chronology has been applied by Ross Chambers in his study of melancholy, *The Writing of Melancholy: Modes of Opposition in Early French Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993; a translation from French of a less ambiguous title, *Mélancolie et opposition: les débuts du modernisme en France* [Paris: Corti, 1987]). Central

are all that remains of this usage. Nevertheless, Neely favours the term 'distraction' to encompass 'all forms of mental distress'<sup>7</sup> in order to defamiliarize the condition and to express the inner experiences of sufferers as they perceived themselves and were perceived by others' (Neely 3). If we leave aside the concern with suffering that instigates much of the socio-cultural analysis of mental illness (and which is central to Neely's study), her eschewal of 'the, to us, more familiar terms "madness" and "melancholy" [which both] exist on a continuum and signify conditions either figurative or literal and ranging from mild to severe' (Neely 3) finds its mirror in Thomas Bernhard's titular primacy of *Verstörung* in his 1967 novel over any thematised "Wahnsinn" or "Melancholie".

The influence of Bernhard's *Verstörung* is underscored by the attention paid to it in essays by two other leading Germanic narrators of distraction within a generation of Bernhard – Peter Handke and W. G. Sebald, whose approaches to combined modes of distraction will also be scrutinised in my extended project.<sup>8</sup> Bernhard's novel was not translated as *Derangement*, as Stephen D. Dowden suggests it might have been,<sup>9</sup> because range is maintained rather than lost over the course of the episodic narrative. A range of medical conditions afflict a range of personalities over a rural geographical range of the Austrian Steiermark, and these are presented in hierarchical terms, all within the range of the first-person narrator but eventually subsumed by the extended monologue from Prince Saurau

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to his survey is Baudelaire's poetry, including 'Le Cygne', on which Chambers focuses his attention more acutely in *Loiterature*, his subsequent study of digression as a mode of distraction (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1999, especially p. 215ff.). In film studies, 'early modernists' are identified in the dialectical context of attraction/distraction as Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists (cf. Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde' [1986], in Robert Stam and Toby Miller, eds., *Film And Theory: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, pp. 229-235 [p. 229]). The appropriation of 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century 'Early Modern' culture in today's scholarship, typified by Neely, does not reflect evident mainstream Modernist concerns relating to distraction: however, a culture of distraction is to be found in this earlier period, too, which has been taken up in the literary context of trauma studies; cf. Thomas Anderson's identification of multiple forms of distraction in John Webster's elegy 'A Monumental Columne' (1613), in which a 'reconfigured corpse metamorphoses into a literary body of work', and to further allusions by Shakespeare in the *Comedy of Errors* (Act 5, Scene 1) and in *Hamlet* (Act 5, Scene 5), in Anderson's *Performing Early Modern Trauma from Shakespeare to Milton* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, pp. 173-4).

<sup>7</sup> 'Distress' is an etymological red herring for this study: although synonymous with the most severe kind of mental confusion in the spectrum considered here, the word has a separate derivation (Latin *distingere*); and its German translations offer ample scope for another expansive project.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Peter Handke, 'Als ich *Verstörung* von Thomas Bernhard las' (1967), in *Prosa Gedichte Theaterstücke Hörspiel Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969, pp. 293-97); and W. G. Sebald, 'Wo die Dunkelheit den Strick zuzieht. Zu Thomas Bernhard', in *Beschreibung des Unglücks: Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke* (Salzburg: Residenz, 1985, pp. 103-114; an earlier version was published in *Literatur und Kritik*, 155 [1981]).

<sup>9</sup> Dowden, *Understanding Thomas Bernhard*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991, p. 24f. The English translation is entitled *Gargoyles* (trans. Richard and Clara Winston. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), which signifies distortions of character as observed and further mediated by the narrator.

that dominates the latter part of the narrative (p. 78ff.).<sup>10</sup> The Prince, who resides on a mountain peak, also occupies the highest social and psychological ranks of the novel's hierarchical ranges. His disturbance is the most severe because he cannot properly execute a state of distraction from his own self-absorption of the kind that we have encountered earlier in the novel in the figure of the industrialist – a mode of living that might have sustained the Prince in his comparable isolation. Dreaming does not distract the Prince but it instead engenders scholarly contemplation and a self-defining stream of monologue indistinguishable from the meanderings of his wakeful discourse: 'Wenn ich träume, richte ich zuerst mein Augenmark auf die ganze Welt, dann erst auf das Traum, den ich träume, indem ich ihn mir streng wissenschaftlich erarbeite. Das Gefühl, das einen Menschen sich dem Tod entziehen läßt auf längere, kürzere Zeit, wir haben es oft, ist für mich mit langen verständlichen oder unverständlichen Sätzen grob zusammengeheftet'.<sup>11</sup> The Prince recapitulates his condition a few pages later: 'Ich versuche, mich von mir abzulenken, aber es gelingt mir nur mehr sporadisch' (p. 221); by contrast, we recall that 'der Industrielle, der sich [. . .] in ein Jagdhaus zurückgezogen habe, sei auf eine ihn gleichzeitig quälende und von der Qual an sich selber ablenkende schriftstellerische Arbeit konzentriert' (p. 50). In both cases, the symbolic thread of *Verstörung* is related to the individual's pursuit of *Ablenkung*, thus positing distraction over a range of frames of mind. Within this range, the narrator and his father, a physician, who his son is accompanying on peripatetic duties, occupy the other extreme in their mobile social engagement, as they diminish any self-absorption of their own with the severe cases they encounter in the patients. Engagement, that is, to the extent of becoming party to the conditions of these scattered (*zerstreute*) patients; to a greater extent, the son is a detached observer who has sought – and who focalises the patients exhibiting – *Ablenkung*. This form of diversion from self-absorption represents an ideal, the model outcome for the narrator in shadowing his father's work, in an attempt to bring focus to his own career development. Whether the narrating son succeeds in attaining this level of distraction depends on the impact he feels of the juxtapositions of '*Verstörung*' presented without any suggestion of apparent resolution by the perceptions of the patients or the narrator. Such *Ablenkung* also resonates with the Queen's pre-performance routine in

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Gudrun Brokoph-Mauch, 'Thomas Bernhard', in Donald G. Daviau, ed., *Major Figures of Austrian Literature* (Berne: Lang, 1987, pp. 89-115): 'the author goes as far as to establish a distinct hierarchy of the various diseases, beginning with physical sepsis and ending with highly spiritual insanity. Each disease correlates with the social rank and intellectual capacity of the individual and is located in a landscape divided into high, middle and low regions' (p. 94). An overview of interpretations of *Verstörung* that relate to binary oppositions within these ranges (e.g. mountain and valley; spirit and corporeality) is offered by Michael Grabber in *Der Protagonist im Erzählwerk Thomas Bernhards* (Innsbruck: Korde, 2004, p. 101).

<sup>11</sup> Bernhard, *Verstörung* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1967), p. 215.

Bernhard's drama *Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972): 'Vor der Vorstellung | gehe ich natürlich | meiner Person aus dem Weg | ich lenke mich ab | ich horche | ich höre' (Bernhard, *Der Ignorant*, p. 74). However, whereas both the Queen and the doctor's son embody the art of interpretation and presentation, complete with its emotional ramifications, the doctors in both works promulgate scientific diagnosis and remedy, dismissing distraction in its non-distraught (or non-*verstört*) forms: 'Ablenkung | Aber natürlich | ist Ablenkung unmöglich' (*Der Ignorant*, p. 75).

*Verstörung* is preceded by a quotation from Blaise Pascal: 'Das ewige Schweigen dieser unendlichen Räume macht mich schauern'.<sup>12</sup> Taken out of Pascal's context, the ambiguity of 'Räume' makes this line cryptic, whether or not parallels are made with Bernhard's subsequent prefatory citations from the same source. One of these citations, provided in the original French, consolidates Bernhard's position in the canon of distraction as a voluntary mode of behaviour signified in German by either *Ablenkung* or *Zerstreuung*: 'Les misères de la vie humaine ont fondé tout cela; comme ils ont vu cela, ils ont pris le divertissement' (*Pensée* 167, in Bernhard, *Am Ziel*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981).<sup>13</sup> Pascal's allusion in the first citation is to limitless *spaces*, as opposed to *rooms*: the latter are distinguished not as *Räume* but as *Zimmer*. By contrasting these two sites, we can correlate Bernhard's perspectives with others that situate distraction in circumstances of either boundlessness or confinement. Pascal qualifies his spatial setting in *Pensée* 205: he is frightened by 'the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not'. These infinite spaces are exemplified in Bernhard's *Verstörung* by the panoramic view from the grounds of Prince Saurau's castle, 'ein tatsächlich in jede Richtung hinein Hunderte von

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<sup>12</sup> Several editions of Pascal's *Pensées* exist in French, English and German, in which the individual fragments have been arranged in different configurations that complicate comparison between the three languages that I intend to feature in my project. For an overview of the French versions, see John Cruickshank, *Pascal: Pensées* (London: Grant & Cutler, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1998 [1983]), pp. 28-33. My references will be to the most accessible English edition, which numbers the *Pensées* in a single continuous sequence: W.F. Trotter, ed. & trans., *Pascal's Pensées*. Project Gutenberg, Ebook 18269, 2006 (first ed. London: Dent, 1931) <<http://www.gutenberg.org/1/8/2/6/18269/>>. The translation in Bernhard's *Verstörung* (p. 5) is of *Pensée* 206.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. also the German translation of Pascal's *Pensée* 168 preceding Bernhard's autobiographical *Der Atem: Eine Entscheidung* (Suhrkamp, 1978), which posits distraction as a realignment of thoughts away from the misery and uncertainty of death: 'Da die Menschen unfähig waren, Tod, Elend, Unwissenheit zu überwinden, sind sie, um glücklich zu sein, übereingekommen, nicht daran zu denken'. *Der Atem* covers a few months of its narrator's young life, during which he, like the doctor's son in *Verstörung*, attempts to reorientate himself in order to clarify his vocational goals. Unlike the doctor's son, however, this narrator, hospitalised with a lung complaint, has given up his studies for a career in sales and has broken off his musical training. He finds that distraction from the latter in favour of the former has been assumed on his behalf by his bedside visitors: 'sie versuchten ununterbrochen während ihrer Großmainer Besuche, direkt oder indirekt, mich auf den Kaufmann zu- und von dem Sänger abzulenken' (*Der Atem*, p. 153).

Kilometern weiter Blick' (*Verstörung*, p. 78), which the narrator has barely taken in before the narrative enters the Prince's inner world. Vast, unfathomable spaces are also encountered in the patients' uncontained states of mind as they are explored in parallel with the topography of the Steiermark, but these represent only a cross-section taken on one day, 'in einem verhältnismäßig großen und außerdem schwierigen Gebiet' (p. 7) that lacks stability to such an extent that it cannot be comprehensively charted. While the doctor admits from the outset that 'oft ist mir alles zuviel' (p. 8), he nevertheless steadily occupies himself each day with these unresolved cases within the bounds of his professional duty. However, the outcome for his son after this single session of work-shadowing is an exacerbation of the problem of distraction from selfhood that underlies the narrative as a whole. The narrator's channelling of multiple encounters with distracted trains of thoughts heightens the sense of restlessness signified among the multiple facets of distraction. The state of being 'distracted from distraction by distraction'<sup>14</sup> thus appears perpetual rather than remedial.

### **Convergences of Distraction: Pascal, Genazino, Kafka and Modernist Theories**

Pascal's contrast between infinite space and single-room captivity, expanded in two further key *Pensées*, forms a hypotext for the literary treatment of man's need to be distracted from spatial, temporal and spiritual confinement. Pascal is most explicit about this need in the first sentence of *Pensée* 131: 'Nothing is so insufferable to man as to be completely at rest, without passions, without business, without diversion, without study'. The use here of 'diversion' indicates the kind of distraction denoted in German by either *Ablenkung* or *Zerstreuung*: the latter term suggests a plurality of focal points arising in the shift away from a source that distraction entails; the former term signals more emphatically the breaking of a connection, of a *Lenkung*, or chain, which in its loss of linkage no longer exhibits this plurality. Moreover, only *Zerstreuung* conveys the positive experience of entertainment, especially in those forms that we tend to label 'light entertainment'. *Ablenkung*, by contrast, tends to be governed by its negative prefix, and in Pascal's context, only *Zerstreuung* thus illustrates the human need for variety in our lives, which may be provided by stimuli of many kinds. *Ablenkung* would have resonated as disconnection from man's linkage to God, the context under which many of Pascal's most

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<sup>14</sup> An expression coined by T. S. Eliot in his poem 'Burnt Norton', the first of his *Four Quartets* (New York: Brace, Harcourt, 1943, p. 6), which succinctly emphasises the ubiquity of distraction. Eliot's engagement with Pascal dates back further: cf. his Introduction to Trotter's edition of the *Pensées*.

relevant remarks on distraction both as diversion and as unrest are grouped in many editions of the *Pensées*.<sup>15</sup>

While Pascal's assertion in *Pensée* 131 is emblematic for *Zerstreuung* as a correlative of *Unruhe* and as a source of *Verstörung*, he attributes in *Pensée* 139 – entitled, like several others, 'Diversion' – 'the different distractions of men' to the confinement of the 'Zimmer', expressing a view that has recurrently been transposed in German literature beyond the negative overtones of unhappiness in which he frames it. In *Achtung Baustelle*, Wilhelm Genazino cites the crux of this *Pensée* in an unattributed German translation. Genazino's context is a collection of analyses of literary remarks that do not always suffice as aphorisms in themselves, but which he posits as aphoristic in their intertextual substance. He challenges Pascal's notion that the 'ganze Unglück der Menschen aus einer einzigen Ursache kommt: nicht ruhig in einem Zimmer bleiben zu können'. Staying in a room is not necessarily coterminous with *Unruhe* but it is, rather, an uncommon test of endurance that enables us to negotiate the outside world: 'Vermutlich ist der Satz deshalb so beliebt, weil wir einerseits seine Wahrheit erkennen, andererseits aber nicht wissen, wie wir ihr genügen sollen. Denken wir nur an unser Erwerbsleben, dem niemand nachgehen kann, ohne von Zeit zu Zeit sein Zimmer zu verlassen'.<sup>16</sup> Genazino favours a remark made in a radio interview by Harold Pinter that presents the intense stasis of undistracted (self-)contemplation as a coping mechanism that is an essential precondition for interaction amid the dynamic distractions of society: 'Bevor man es nicht geschafft hat, in einem Zimmer zu leben, kann man nicht hinausgehen und kämpfen'.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, confinement in a room counters the form of distraction termed *Unruhe*; and it enables contemplation,

<sup>15</sup> The second section of Trotter's edition of the *Pensées* (containing nos. 60-183) is entitled 'The Misery of Man Without God': this context renders distraction a fundamentally negative phenomenon. My larger project will investigate more extensively the dynamics of distraction in Pascal, picking up on the dialectics of *divertissement*, *ennui* and *bonheur* that have been elucidated by Nicholas Hammond in *Playing With Truth: Language and the Human Condition in Pascal's 'Pensées'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, pp. 109-114 and 155-162). Particular attention will be paid to the distinctions between the French use of *diversion* in a positive sense, exemplified by Montaigne, and the evolving connotations of *divertissement*, Pascal's favoured term, which rivals – but does not always parallel – *Zerstreuung* in its convoluted development.

<sup>16</sup> Genazino, *Achtung Baustelle*. Frankfurt am Main: Schöffling, 1998, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> This sentence forms the title of Genazino's commentary (*Achtung Baustelle*, pp. 38-39). Its English source is a BBC Home Service radio interview with Pinter by Kenneth Tynan, 19 August 1960 (first broadcast 28 October 1960): 'Before you've managed to adjust yourself to living alone in your room [. . .] you are not really terribly fit and equipped to go out and fight the battles which are fought mostly in **abstractions** in the outside world'. (Citation pieced together from slightly differently extrapolated fragments in Peter Raby, 'Introduction', in Peter Raby, *The Cambridge Companion To Harold Pinter*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 10, and Elizabeth Sakellaridou, *Pinter's Female Portraits: A Study of Female Characters in the Plays of Harold Pinter*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998, p. 4.) My emphasis here of Pinter's conflation of abstractions with distractions facilitates our understanding of *Zerstreuung* as a shift away from concretion, and it points up the definition of *Zerstreuung* proposed by Kant that I shall shortly consider. Genazino's citation (unattributed) unsurprisingly excludes the last clause of Pinter's sentence, as distraction in his narrative invariably embraces concrete objects as well as abstract impressions of them.



which *Zerstreuung* in its Modernist definitions has opposed: 'Pinter enthüllt die bloß kompensatorische Funktion von Ruhe, von der Pascal vielleicht noch nichts hat ahnen können. Die Besinnung im Zimmer, so wir sie zustande bringen, ist kaum mehr als eine Vorbereitung auf das oft besinnungslose Leben, um das wir draußen "kämpfen" müssen' (*Achtung Baustelle* 38).

Genazino as a novelist is an architect of distraction in several of its forms. His first major novel sequence alone, the *Abschaffel* trilogy, contains over thirty separate references to (and combinations of) the titular protagonist's 'Zerstreuung', 'Ablenkung', 'Unruhe', 'Unterhaltung', 'Abschweifungsphantasie', 'Abwechslung' and distracted sensations for which no single term suffices.<sup>18</sup> One incident, early in the middle volume, encapsulates *Abschaffel*'s condition as a modern man who is too readily distracted by the potential significance of even the most banal objects to be able either to handle calmly his dual confinements at home and in his office job or to maintain an equilibrium between these settings and his meanderings through a relatively small part of the outside world. This incident also serves as a blueprint for the distracting 'Kleinigkeiten' that Genazino's protagonists frequently magnify in his subsequent novelistic publications to date: 'Abschaffel bewegte sich von einem ungeklärten Vorgang zum nächsten, ohne etwas erledigen zu können' (*Abschaffel*, p. 168). On returning home one evening to the silence and solitude that he has managed to evade all day, *Abschaffel* is distracted by the sight on his balcony of a cardboard box, repeatedly soaked by rain, in which he had brought home his shopping several weeks earlier, but which he has still not bothered to dispose of: 'so präzise wollte er sich mit dem Alltag nicht einlassen. Das hätte ja ausgesehen, als wäre er eine Mann, der an seinem Feierabend einen leeren Karton in einen Mülleimer wirft' (*ibid.*). Distraction for *Abschaffel* here is fourfold. First, he seeks distraction (in the sense of *Ablenkung*) from the notion of anyone else noticing how mundane his life is; thus, he leaves the box – itself an emblem of mundaneness – on his balcony as a second incidence of distraction (*Zerstreuung*), this time from the act of putting it in the dustbin, which both he and his assumed observers would find tedious. Furthermore, the box

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<sup>18</sup> Genazino, *Abschaffel* (*Roman-Trilogie: Abschaffel* [1977], *Die Vernichtung der Sorgen* [1978], *Falsche Jahre* [1979]). Munich: DTV, 2002. Cf. the contemporary French novelist of everyday absurdities Jean-Philippe Toussaint's frequent descriptions of his protagonists responding 'distrainment' in certain of his comparably introspective but more markedly ludic and minimalist narratives (at least five times in *La Réticence* [Paris: Minuit, 1991]; and at least fifteen times in *La Télévision* [Minuit, 1997]). As Roy C. Caldwell points out, Toussaint's characters – like Genazino's – operate in 'a simulation of life', 'a level of abstraction', in order to 'flee the pain, the wounds, the aggression of existence' (Caldwell, 'Jean-Philippe Toussaint', in William Thompson, ed., *The Contemporary Novel In France*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1995, pp. 369-381 [p. 381]).

functions as a distraction from the unchanging familiarity of his indoor furnishings: thoughts of the wind dislodging the box and the rain saturating it unsettle Abschaffel, arousing *Unruhe*. Finally, in shifting his gaze so soon after coming indoors away from his furniture to an awkwardly placed object outside, Abschaffel proves himself a devotee of a mode of behaviour that Franz Kafka has termed 'Zerstreutes Hinausschaun': looking through a window in anticipation of flux outside to counter an intolerably tedious sense of immobility indoors. Even as simple and worthless an item as a cardboard box shifts Abschaffel's attention away from boredom and towards the demarcation of absurdity in everyday life – but in privileging such objects, Abschaffel draws attention to the lack of enrichment that he is able to execute in his constricted existence. This enrichment is brought about for others either by distractions within Pascal's range of 'play and the society of women, war, and high posts' (although Pascal argues that these do not make us truly happy; *Pensée* 139), or by absorption in the modern mass media, or by 'Zerstreutes Hinausschauen' as recorded by Kafka, when he presses his cheek 'an die Klinke des Fensters', through which light and life populate the contrasting shades and tones that offer variety when indoors only dull uniformity is encountered:

Unten sieht man das Licht der freilich schon sinkenden Sonne auf dem Gesicht des kindlichen Mädchens, das so geht und sich umschaute, und zugleich sieht man den Schatten des Mannes darauf, der hinter ihm rascher kommt.

Dann ist der Mann schon vorübergegangen und das Gesicht des Kindes ist ganz hell.<sup>19</sup>

Kafka's window concretises the visual mediation of distraction. The window as a projection surface prefigures the cinema screen and the television in regulating our view of

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<sup>19</sup> Kafka, 'Zerstreutes Hinausschaun', in *Die Verwandlung und andere Erzählungen* (Cologne: Könenmann, 1995), p.20. This 87-word vignette was one of Kafka's earliest publications, composed in 1907 and taking a motif he had already established in the similarly short piece 'Das Gassenfenster' (1906), which he was to develop in several of the other components of his first collection *Betrachtung* (1913). For more details, see Hartmut Binder, *Kafka-Kommentar zu sämtlichen Erzählungen* (Munich: Winkler, 1975). 'Zerstreuung' is prominent elsewhere in Kafka's oeuvre: incidences in his novels – albeit without explicit reference to this signifier – can be extrapolated from Stanley Corngold's commentary, 'Franz Kafka: the radical modernist', in Graham Bartram, ed., *The Modern German Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 62-76, especially pp. 64-67). In particular, Karl Rossmann's 'rapture of distraction' in *Der Verschollene* [written 1912-14] is compared to the "indifferentism" cultivated by modern painters like Francis Bacon and Dan Ching', rather than to any 'doctrine of epiphanies' (Corngold, p. 64). Also, both in this novel and in *Das Schloß* [written 1922], *Zerstreuung* is deployed as a narrative strategy in the interlinking of stories narrated by their characters, which 'has the effect of dispersing the authority of the narrator and making the novel, to a radical degree, an affair of co-constitution between author and reader' (ibid., p. 66f.). Kafka's references to other signifiers of distraction should also be scrutinised: in one particularly notable aphorism he regards life itself as an unfathomable diversion: 'Das Leben ist eine fortwährende Ablenkung, die nicht einmal zur Besinnung darüber kommen läßt, wovon sie ablenkt' ('Fragmente aus Heften und losen Blättern', in *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andere Prosa aus seinem Nachlaß*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1983, p. 242).

stimuli that gain proximity the more we are drawn towards them. Prior to acknowledging the seminal status of Kafka's vignette, Lutz Koepnick highlights the effects of windows on both controlling and releasing the viewer's impulses to be distracted: 'As they frame and reframe different perspectives onto the world, they also restructure the viewer's attention, regulate his or her perceptual distraction, or manage our desire simply to drift into the unknown and seemingly unfettered'.<sup>20</sup> This effect is emphatically *dis*-traction, as the viewer's physical motion is restricted by the window as a boundary, which also separates the viewer from the movements it reveals outside. The window enables the internalisation of exterior alterity: in combination with the agency of the imagination, it represents, in Michael Braun's words, 'a threshold to the objective world and to the human mind. The German-Jewish writer from Prague was certainly well aware of the approximately homonym Hebrew words for window (*chalon*) and dream (*chalom*)'.<sup>21</sup>

Genazino's and Kafka's applications of *Zerstreuung* converge in their method of prospecting from a confined interior and stimulating the dispersal of their thoughts away from self-absorption. Both methods involve confronting another space separate from the viewer's own, its border demarcated by the window. Through this window, both viewers take in different dimensions of what they see, which is invariably subject to motion – changes of light and weather conditions in the case of Abschaffel's box; movements along the street in the case of Kafka's outdoor figures. The prism of the window modulates the viewer's sense of proximity or distance in the passage between internal and external spaces; between the singularity of selfhood and the compound alterity of *Zerstreuung*. Dispersal and compounding are essential criteria for our understanding of *Zerstreuung*, the term that I shall now scrutinise.

### **Approaches to *Zerstreuung*: Dispersal and Dissemination**

Despite the shared etymology of the English and German terms, to consider *Zerstreuung* as unqualified distraction would detract from its breadth of signification. In the digital age, certain leading commentators have begun to prominently emphasise the magnitude of *Zerstreuung* beyond its arbitrary translation as distraction and its integration in (post-)modern mass culture. Far from Pascal's negative context of distraction, Samuel Weber

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<sup>20</sup> Koepnick, *Framing Attention: Windows On Modern German Culture*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007, p.1.

<sup>21</sup> Braun, 'Rooms with a View?: Kafka's "Fensterblicke"', *German Studies Review*, 15:1 (February 1992), 11-23 (p. 3).

identifies *Zerstreuung* as a ‘feature’ of both production and reception in cinema.<sup>22</sup> Weber finds that ‘the literal resources of the German word, and hence its connotations, are far richer than the essentially privative terms “distraction” and [the occasional alternative translation] “absentminded” might lead one to believe’ (ibid.). Moreover, the term’s history in German philosophy ‘demonstrates that its significance can in no way be encompassed by the concept of “distraction”, however important that notion undoubtedly is’. *Zerstreuung* is better understood, following a term Weber associates with Martin Heidegger, but which also features in Siegfried Kracauer’s key essay ‘Kult der Zerstreuung’, as *Mannigfaltung*, or manifolding. Manfred Schneider surveys the usage of *Zerstreuung* more extensively, opening his study with a vigorous account of its potency: ‘Lange bevor sich das Böse in Gestalt von Dämonen und gefallen Engeln in die Welt stürzte, trug es bereits einen Namen: Zerstreuung. [. . .] Alle abendlandischen Meisterdenker, Juristen, Theologen, Philosophen und Pädagogen, vereinen ihre Stimme im Fluch auf die Übermacht der Zerstreuung. Von Platon über Augustinus, Luther, Kant, Goethe, Hegel bis hin zu Adorno und Heidegger windet sich diese Kette der vom Horror geschüttelten Geistesgrößen’.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Schneider distinguishes the ubiquitous Walter Benjamin as the first to find *Zerstreuung* encouraging rather than a negative phenomenon: ‘vielleicht als erster anspruchsvoller Denker hat Walter Benjamin der Zerstreuung mehr abgewonnen als nur den Ekel’ (ibid). Schneider thus, unfortunately, does not promote the significant treatment of *Zerstreuung* in relation to the evolution of popular entertainment prior to or contemporaneously with Benjamin as shaping the term’s meaning constructively.

The impact of *Zerstreuung* on German Enlightenment thought is especially remarkable. Immanuel Kant treats the concept in some detail in his *Anthropologie* of 1798, but without discernible regard for a century of cultural references to the distracted character that represent a confluence of intellectual self-awareness, social role demarcation and artistic

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<sup>22</sup> Samuel Weber, ‘Mass Mediauras: or, Art, Aura, and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin’, in David S. Ferris, ed., *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, pp. 27-49 [p. 39]). Weber takes Martin Heidegger’s ontological use of *Zerstreuung* in both *Sein und Zeit* and the related lectures (‘Das Problem von Sein und Zeit’, § 10 of *Die Metaphysik des Satzes vom Grunde*, in Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 26 [Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1990, p. 173ff.]) as his cue for reappraising Walter Benjamin’s use of the term, and he acknowledges Jacques Derrida’s ‘extremely suggestive’ treatment of Heidegger’s association of *Zerstreuung* with *Dasein*.

<sup>23</sup> Manfred Schneider, ‘Kollekten des Geistes: Die Zerstreuung im Visier der Kulturkritik’, *Neue Rundschau* 110:2 (1999), pp. 44-55 (p. 44). Schneider’s previous work on autobiography prefigures his skilful contribution here in submitting such a complicated signifier as *Zerstreuung* to an intense scrutiny that resonates with the aims of my project. His monograph *Die erkaltete Herzensschrift: Der autobiographische Text im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Hanser, 1986) was one of the first in German to analyse Michel Leiris’s autobiographical project; he identifies Leiris’s operation of three semiological systems in *L’Age d’Homme*, including the astrological – which tessellates with the cosmological sense of *Zerstreuung* – alongside physiological and psychological dimensions (Schneider, *Herzensschrift*, p. 38).

stylisation. More recently, German and Anglophone cultural studies have tended to overlook the currency of *Zerstreuung* in the long 18<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps because of its origins in French work. We must turn to the German Romance scholar Patricia Oster for analysis of how, triggered by Pascal, ‘die komplexe und widersprüchliche Natur des dezentrierten Ich bringt Strategien des Bewußtseins hervor, die sich der Konzentration mit Ablenkung und Zerstreuung widersetzen’, principally in French Classical drama.<sup>24</sup> She highlights the iconic status of La Bruyère’s characterisation of distraction in *Les Caractères ou les mœurs de ce siècle* (1688), which contains ‘eine ganze Folge komischer Pantomimen der Zerstreuung’, most obviously, but not solely, in the ‘Denkmal’ figure of Ménalque, known as ‘Le Disträit’. Ménalque is not merely a character: ‘vielmehr entwirft er eine Vielzahl von Situationen, in denen die moderne Sozialisation den Menschen in einen Kampf mit den “tausend äußeren Dingen” verstrickt, die das Ich dezentrieren’ (Oster, p. 273).<sup>25</sup> This distracted figure became more pronounced in Jean-François Regnard’s staging of *Le Disträit* (1697), and the signification of ‘die Unverfügbarkeit des Bewußtseins’ became both dispersed beyond the topoi of love and learning<sup>26</sup> and focal to the portrayal of Léandre, the protagonist.

When Regnard’s comedy was brought to the German stage and tongue seventy years later, the comic potential signified in its title was problematised by Lessing, following its performance in Hamburg as *Der Zerstreute*: ‘Ich glaube schwerlich, daß unsere Großväter den deutschen Titel dieses Stücks verstanden hätten. Noch Schlegel übersetzte Disträit durch Träumer. Zerstreut sein, ein Zerstreuter, ist lediglich nach der Analogie des Französischen gemacht. Wir wollen nicht untersuchen, wer das Recht hatte, diese Worte zu machen; sondern wir wollen sie brauchen, nachdem sie einmal gemacht sind. Man versteht sie nunmehr, und das ist genug’.<sup>27</sup> J. G. Robertson notes that A.W. Schlegel was unimpressed by the figure of the *Träumer*; and Johann Adolf Scheibe supplemented *Der*

<sup>24</sup> Oster, ‘Das dezentrierte Ich. Phänomenologie der Zerstreuung im Siècle Classique’, in Aleida and Jan Assmann, eds., *Aufmerksamkeiten*. Munich: Fink, 2001, pp. 265-285 (p. 270).

<sup>25</sup> A further dimension of the ‘disträit’ character in French has been surveyed by Philippe Roger in ‘The Distracted Womanizer’ (trans. Bettina Lerner, *Yale French Studies*, 94 [1998], 163-178): his focus is on libertinage in *Les amours du chevalier de Faublas* [1787-1790] by Jean-Baptiste Louvet de Couvray, whose protagonist is not distinguished by an individual character trait like the other male figures but as a ‘distracted hero’, who ‘uses the word “distraction” as a euphemism to define his unique rapport with the rest of the world, or more specifically, his relationship to women’, who appear to him in concentrations (Roger, p. 164f.).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Gadi Algazi, op. cit., who alludes to the ‘kulturell tradierten Bild’ evolving from the late Middle Ages of ‘Geistesabwesenheit’ in the ‘Gelehrtenhabitus’, which manifests itself in ‘gelehrte Vergeßlichkeit und Zerstreuung’ (p. 242).

<sup>27</sup> Lessing, ‘Achtundzwanzigstes Stück, Den 4. August 1767’, in *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. Teddington: Echo Library, 2006, p. 103.

*Zerstreute* with 'Unschlüssige [Unentschlüssige]'.<sup>28</sup> *Zerstreuung* is key to Lessing's value judgements on comedy in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*: he believes that 'Die Komödie will durch Lachen bessern; aber nicht eben durch Verlachen'; for example, 'Wer aber von Natur zerstreut sei, der lasse sich durch Spöttereien eben so wenig bessern, als ein Hinkender' (Lessing, *Hamburgische*, p. 104). While Robertson dismisses Lessing's remarks as being insubstantial and unoriginal paraphrases of French sources,<sup>29</sup> they are notable in the semantic evolution of distraction in German literature and performance, as well as in highlighting the dichotomy of *Zerstreuung* and *Aufmerksamkeit*: 'Sind wir nicht Meister unserer Aufmerksamkeit? Und was ist die Zerstreuung anders, als ein unrechter Gebrauch unserer Aufmerksamkeit?' (ibid.) Thus, Lessing subordinates distraction as a suspect activity that undermines our mastery of attention. He falls short of designating attention as a 'Gegenbegriff' to distraction in the emphatic manner of Oster, who asserts that 'Aufmerksamkeit und Zerstretheit bedingen sich gegenseitig. Von Zerstretheit spricht man, wenn es unmöglich ist, die Aufmerksamkeit auf einen bestimmten Gegenstand zu konzentrieren, oder aber umgekehrt, wenn sich die ganze Aufmerksamkeit auf erscheint'.<sup>30</sup> Oster's definition takes for granted the operation of the two concepts of attention and distraction in the same sphere. Attention occupies no more constant a position than distraction; both are states of in-betweenness. Geoffrey Hartman, in 'Scattered Thoughts on *Aufmerksamkeit*/ Zerstreute Gedanken über Aufmerksamkeit', a contribution to the same collection of studies of forms of attention, nods not only to the digressive essay format of eighteenth-century German writers such as Lessing but also to the arbitrariness of fixing attention, which is situated between the boundaries of "looking for" and "waiting for".<sup>31</sup> What is more, 'zerstreute Anmerkungen' are not necessarily presented in a scattered form but are typically gathered together in a collection of some kind that comes closer to approximating the state of *Sammlung* to which *Zerstreuung* has been opposed than to conveying utter randomness. A double irony is to be detected in one of the glossary entries for Kant's *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (1798) by

<sup>28</sup> J. G. Robertson, *Lessing's Dramatic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939, p. 192.

<sup>29</sup> Robertson identifies the French theatre and music historian François Parfaict (1698-1753) as 'Lessing's source of information concerning *Der Zerstreute*' (Robertson, p. 191). The analogy of the limping man (*Hinkender/boiteux*) is lifted from a citation by the Frères Parfaict from the *Lettres d'un François* of the Abbé Leblanc (1745; Robertson, pp. 192-93 and 391); the *Lachen/Verlachen* distinction between forms of ridicule can be traced back to the Roman teacher of rhetoric Quintilian (c.35-100 A.D.; Robertson, p. 390).

<sup>30</sup> Oster, p. 265; she takes as her starting point a historical survey of *Zerstretheit* by the linguist Eugen Lerch.

<sup>31</sup> Hartman in Assmann and Assmann, eds., op. cit., pp. 129-139 (p. 129). Cf. James M. Van Der Laan, 'The German Essay of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century: Mirror of its Age', in Richard E. Schade, ed., *Lessing Yearbook*, Vol. 18. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986, pp. 179-196, who cites Klopstock's reference in 'Gedanken über die Natur der Poesie' [1759] to 'a loose combination of ideas, "zerstreute Gedanken"' as typifying this mode of writing also practised by Lessing, most explicitly in 'Zerstreute Gedanken über das Epigramm' [1771].

Reinhard Brandt, which rounds up prominent uses of the term that resonate with the work of philosophy. On the one hand, this collation of a scattering of sources serves to edify the reader who might otherwise be fixed on Kant's renderings of *Zerstreuung* without appreciating their connectedness to other instances – including to the dynamic of 'zerstreute Anmerkungen':

*Der Zerstreuer* war der Titel einer Zeitschrift Samuel Christian Hollmanns in Göttingen (1737). – [Werner] Leibbrand und [Annemarie] Wettley [, *Der Wahnsinn: Geschichte der abendländischen Psychopathologie*. Freiburg: Alber,]1961, 364: "Die Zerstreuung (*distractio*), jenes etwa seit Lessing neu aufgekommene Wort, das in engstem Zusammenhang mit dem 'Collectum' der Pietisten steht, [...]". Bei Kant wird ebenfalls der Gegensatz der "*collectio animi*" erwähnt ([*Anthropologie*, p. ]207,[I.]20 mit Kommentar).<sup>32</sup>

Is this (or, indeed, any) gloss an instrument of focusing attention on a concept pieced together from a broader historical context than the primary text explicitly acknowledges? Or is the gloss an agent of distraction, drawing apart the epistemological unity of a signifier as treated by one author and manifolding its treatments across a range of discourses by others? On the other hand, the first usage noted by Brandt aptly sums up the innate dichotomy conveyed by *Zerstreuung*: Hollmann's periodical binds together pieces of writing, yet its title pays homage to the act of dispersing them. *Zerstreuung* here, as in the references made by Leibbrand and Wettley and Kant, stands for spatialisation as a counter-movement to the constriction of the collective.

Brandt highlights the dispersion of Kant's usage of *Zerstreuung* (*distractio*), commencing with its cosmological origins: 'In den Frühschriften ist "Zerstreuung" der terminus technicus für den Zustand der Materie im unendlichen Raum vor der Stern- und Planetenbildung' (Brandt, p. 293). Over the course of Kant's oeuvre, however, *Zerstreuung* gained psychological and epistemological signification. Brandt's commentary discerns how distraction in Kant's *Anthropologie* occurs at three points in the constellation of human development. Firstly, it is to be found 'im Hinblick auf die Kindheit des Menschen'; Brandt alludes to the end of the first paragraph of the *Anthropologie*, where Kant's perspectives of both the selectivity of adult memory and the incompleteness of object-conception in childhood coincide to emphasise dispersion: 'Die *Erinnerung* seiner Kinderjahre reicht aber

<sup>32</sup> Reinhard Brandt, *Kritischer Kommentar zu Kants Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht (Kant Forschungen, Vol. 10)*. Hamburg: Meiner, 1999, p. 294 <<http://web.uni-marburg.de/kant/webseiten/kommentar/text203.html>> . Brandt's primary references, like mine, are to Kant's *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (1. Teil, 1. Buch), in *Akademieausgabe von Immanuel Kants Gesammelten Werken*, Vol. VII: *Der Streit der Fakultäten* [1798]. Universität Duisburg-Essen: <[www.korpora.org/kant/aa07/](http://www.korpora.org/kant/aa07/)>.

bei weitem nicht an jene Zeit, weil sie nicht die Zeit der Erfahrungen, sondern bloß zerstreuter, unter den Begriff des Objects noch nicht vereinigter Wahrnehmungen war.' (Kant, *Anthropologie*, p. 128). Secondly, *Zerstreuung* may represent 'den zufälligen momentanen Geisteszustand des normalen Erwachsenen' (Brandt, p. 294). Thirdly, and most troublingly, *Zerstreuung* describes 'den habituellen, schon leicht pathologischen Zustand geistig gefährdeter Menschen' (ibid.). With this nuance, Kant's sense of *Zerstreuung* incorporates in its advanced stages an element of *Verstörung*; however, the extent and focus of habituation vary, and we need to tease apart Kant's condensed presentations of distraction to appreciate how different strands have been taken up by subsequent commentators.

Kant is concerned with the system of consciousness within which both attention and distraction operate: it follows, I would contend, that if distraction is attention reconfigured, focused attention would, confusingly, be considered a reconfiguration of scattered *Zerstreuung*. Fortunately, the English signifier *awareness* is at our disposal to mediate between consciousness and attention; and a body of Anglophone scholarship in psychology strengthens my case for distinguishing, as Kant does in his *Anthropologie*, the configurations of awareness that become manifested as forms of either attention or distraction, and which are thus pertinent to *Zerstreuung*.<sup>33</sup> Chris Nunn, while acknowledging that consciousness and awareness are broadly synonymous in everyday usage, makes two key distinctions between these two terms. On the one hand, 'consciousness is always about something': it has developed connotations in philosophy (for instance, of intentionality and emotionality) that relate to definable sensations. Awareness, on the other hand, is a 'basic phenomenon', which may be more abstract, and

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. the 'Conventional theoretical framework' offered by William A. Johnston and David L. Strayer in 'A Dynamic, Evolutionary Perspective on Attention Capture': 'Processing of external stimuli is typically divided into preattentive and postattentive stages. Awareness or consciousness is associated with postattentive processing. Because postattentive processing (a.k.a. awareness) is assumed to be limited in capacity and incapable of the parallel processing of the usually massive preattentive flow of stimulus information, selection of just a small subset of this information is often necessary. In order for behavior to be adaptive and goal directed, this selection must be systematic. Attention is the process by which this systematic selection is accomplished.' (in Folk and Gibson, eds., *Attraction, Distraction And Action: Multiple Perspectives on Attentional Capture*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001, pp. 375-398 [p. 376]; my emphasis). Attention is thus a selectively configured, or filtered, superimposition on the reconfigurable process-as-state (or state-as-process) of awareness. Attention is not a constant state: if it were, Addie Johnson and Robert W. Proctor point out (in *Attention: Theory and Practice*. London: Sage, 2004), we would be distracted all the time. The role of attention is 'to bring perceptual information to conscious awareness' (Johnson & Proctor, p. 58), but the auditory and visual modes by which information is transmitted and captured differ. Johnson and Proctor note that we compensate for 'the inability to move the ear to catch wanted sounds in the way that the eyes can be moved to catch wanted sights' by "tuning" sensory receptors in the cochlea to favour one sound over another, thus mitigating distraction (p. 104).



exists beyond the concretions of consciousness.<sup>34</sup> Awareness 'lights up, so to speak, things like the idea of myself, my feelings at the moment and so forth. Although people have some idea of "I" almost constantly present either somewhere in the background or, more often, well to the forefront of their consciousness, the pure awareness described by Zen masters and very occasionally experienced by many people does exist. All sense of person and other common attributes of consciousness are lost when in such a state, but awareness remains' (ibid.). Nunn also clarifies the relationship between awareness and attention: 'attention is just another brain function that can be shown to have localised manifestations (mainly in the frontal lobes) which may or may not enter awareness' (ibid., p. 27). The prominence of attention as an object of study over awareness is understandable, given that 'although [attention] forms part of the ordinary stream of awareness, it appears to exist in a different time-frame and to have a controlling role' (ibid., p. 99).

Attributing abstraction to either distraction or attention in mutually exclusive terms poses a particular problem. Reinhard Brandt's commentary emphasises how abstraction for Kant is not consistently coterminous with *Zerstreuung*, despite this latter term being defined in the *Anthropologie* as 'der Zustand einer Abkehrung der Aufmerksamkeit (abstractio)' (*Anthropologie*, p. 206). Elsewhere, abstraction appears better opposed to *Aufmerksamkeit* than distraction: 'Die "abstractio" wird sonst durchaus nicht als Zerstreuung, sondern als Komplementärstück der Aufmerksamkeit gefaßt, vgl. [*Anthropologie*, p. ]131,[II.]16-18 mit Kommentar. Man möchte also just hier von einer Zerstreuung des Autors sprechen und muß statt "abstractio", bezogen auf die Abkehr, "attentio", bezogen auf die Aufmerksamkeit selbst, in die Klammer setzen' (Brandt, p. 294). Distraction is thus a condition of consciousness, rather than of attention, as Rodolphe Gasché points out: 'Empirical consciousness is not only diverse and distracted in the different representations that it may accompany, it is distracted in itself, and thus in no situation authoritatively to secure self-coherence or self-identity'.<sup>35</sup>

Kant draws a further distinction, between *abstractio* as voluntary *Zerstreuung*, which he terms 'Dissipation', and involuntary *Zerstreuung*, which he names 'Abwesenheit (*absentia*) von sich selbst' (*Anthropologie* p. 206). Gasché identifies the kinds of *Zerstreuung* identified by Walter Benjamin in film and architecture as falling into this latter category

<sup>34</sup> Nunn, *Awareness: What It Is, What It Does*. London: Routledge, 1996, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Gasché, 'Objective Diversions: On Some Kantian Themes in Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"', in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, eds., *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*. London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 183-204 (p. 199).

(Gasché, p. 199); but neither Gasché nor Benjamin projects *absentia* into the realm of mental illness – the territory demarcated by *Verstörtheit* – to the extent that Kant does within the same passage of the *Anthropologie*. The interplay of concentration and distraction is problematical even when a thinker is deemed to be in control of his mind, as the memory researcher Hermann Ebbinghaus acknowledged in his *Grundzüge der Psychologie* at the start of the twentieth century: 'Wie schwer ist es, ein und denselben Gedanken längere Zeit festzuhalten! Man will sich ganz in ihn versenken, nichts anderes neben ihm aufkommen lassen. Aber nicht allzulange später, während die äußeren Anzeichen energischer Konzentration, eine bestimmte Kopf- und Augenhaltung, zusammengekniffene Lippen u.s.w. ruhig fortbestehen, ertappt man sich plötzlich darüber, daß man an etwas ganz anderes denkt, und wird sich deutlich bewußt, daß der festzuhaltende Gedanke, statt inzwischen zu beharren, soeben gerade aufs neue auftaucht.'<sup>36</sup> For Kant, however, our inability to expel *Zerstreuung* from a concentrated mind is a fundamental weakness that can lead to madness, not because of any loss of focus on this 'festzuhaltende Gedanke', but rather when an inability to become 'deutlich bewußt' of any new thoughts – and thus an inability to enact a further level of *abstractio* – results:

Es ist eine von den Gemüthsschwächen, durch die reproductive Einbildungskraft an eine Vorstellung, auf welche man große oder anhaltende Aufmerksamkeit verwandt hat, geheftet zu sein und von ihr nicht abkommen, d. i. den Lauf der Einbildungskraft wiederum frei machen zu können. Wenn dieses Übel habituell und auf einen und denselben Gegenstand gerichtet wird, so kann es in Wahnsinn ausschlagen. (*Anthropologie* pp. 206-7.)

In this instance, Kant implies that protracted *Zerstreuung* involves a loss of control over one's self-awareness – that is, until or unless momentary self-awareness of the kind described by Ebbinghaus, which amounts to Kant and Brandt's 'zufälligen momentanen Geisteszustand des normalen Erwachsenen' (op. cit.), creates a further but temporary distraction.<sup>37</sup>

For Kant, the social impact of *Zerstreuung* is negative: 'In Gesellschaft zerstreut zu sein, ist unhöflich, oft auch lächerlich' (*Anthropologie*, p. 207). *Zerstreuung* amounts to deviance from conforming to a public role for those of limited social standing, represented by crudely

<sup>36</sup> Ebbinghaus, *Grundzüge der Psychologie*, Vol. 1. Leipzig: Veit, 1902, p. 599.

<sup>37</sup> Nunn regards a comparable momentary sensation, the quale, as a unit of awareness. He defines the quale as the 'content of any moment of experience', which is directly accessible only to the person who experiences it. While memory of the quale is possible so that it can be reported, distractions are likely to overrule attention to the authenticity of conveying that past moment, as 'one can never be sure of what might constitute the full range of awareness' (Nunn, p. 4).

stereotyped women and waiters: 'Das Frauenzimmer ist dieser Anwendung gewöhnlich nicht unterworfen; sie müßten denn sich mit Gelehrsamkeit abgeben. Ein Bedienter, der in seiner Aufwartung bei Tische zerstreut ist, hat gemeiniglich etwas Arges, entweder was er vorhat, oder wovon er die Folge besorgt, im Kopfe' (ibid.). In both these cases, the enactment of private thoughts of *Zerstreuung* is considered a public danger. On the other hand, however, distraction is necessary for those in positions of power as a way of regaining control of their minds; it symbolises their authority to concern themselves with more than the concentratedness of their public duties. Kant's exemplar of the preacher who keeps his sermon apart from his usual cognitive activities<sup>38</sup> operates as a conduit to a broader advocacy of the remedial and regenerative force of social discourse:

Aber sich zu zerstreuen, d. i. seiner unwillkürlich reproductiven Einbildungskraft eine Diversion machen, z. B. wenn der Geistliche seine memorirte Predigt gehalten und das Nachrumoren im Kopf verhindern will, dies ist ein nothwendiges, zum Theil auch künstliches Verfahren der Vorsorge für die Gesundheit seines Gemüths. Ein anhaltendes Nachdenken über einen und denselben Gegenstand läßt gleichsam einen Nachklang zurück, der (wie eben dieselbe Musik zu einem Tanze, wenn sie lange fort dauert, dem von der Lustbarkeit Zurückkehrenden noch immer nachsummt, oder wie Kinder ein und dasselbe bon mot von ihrer Art, vornehmlich wenn es rhythmisch klingt, unaufhörlich wiederholen) - der, sage ich, den Kopf belästigt und nur durch Zerstreuung und Verwendung der Aufmerksamkeit auf andere Gegenstände, z. B. Lesung der Zeitungen, gehoben werden kann. - Das sich Wiedersammeln (*collectio animi*), um zu jeder neuen Beschäftigung bereit zu sein, ist eine die Gesundheit des Gemüths befördernde Herstellung des Gleichgewichts seiner Seelenkräfte. (Ibid.)

Kant's dichotomy of popular music, considered repetitive, simple and harmfully distracting, and the press, substantial and edifying, nowadays appears false due to the technological evolution of both of these media. We shall shortly observe how comparable sentiments about mid-twentieth century popular music have been expressed by Theodor Adorno; but Kant's less politically-charged observation here holds enduring intergeneric value. He compares a person distracted by music to a child captivated by the novelty of a new sound that it emphatically seeks to assimilate through constant repetition.<sup>39</sup> Such a child-like respondent to music, or to any other replicable mediated stimulus, passes distraction on in

<sup>38</sup> Unlike Stockdale, the subject of Thomas Hardy's short story 'The Distracted Preacher' (1879), a young Methodist minister who is euphemistically "distracted" by a Mrs Lizzy Newberry: 'The minister suffered from these distractions, and his extemporized sermons were not improved thereby. Already he often said Romans for Corinthians in the pulpit, and gave out hymns in strange cramped metres' (in Hardy, *Wessex Tales*. London: Macmillan, 1912, pp. 215–287 [p. 239]).

<sup>39</sup> The representation of distraction in music, while beyond the immediate scope of the present study, merits more serious consideration than Kant invites in his allusion here to simple repetition. In particular, the applications of *divertimento*, a genre of entertaining incidental music for listeners and players, cultivated at courts during the classical period, including in southern Germany and Austria, should be investigated; as should *divertissement*, contemporaneous in France and typically performed in conjunction with spectacles of various kinds. Cf. *New Grove Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Vol. 7. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2002, pp. 392-6.

turn to the discerning critic, who fears that the repeater of the offending sounds or words may lack awareness of the effects of repetition in general, which include the manipulation of distraction on an audience, a point which Adorno was to take up.

In his praise of the discourse provided by newspapers, dispersed across the printed pages and further disseminated by discussions between their readers, Kant does not posit the press as the source of instant gratification that it was to become after it embraced photography. A century later, competing newspapers would exploit distraction boldly (not least in typographical terms) by encapsulating the most resonant elements of their stories in visually seductive headlines, captions and images that would capture the largest of readerships and provoke responses in emotional rather than critical terms. In Kant's time, when newspaper reading was still a relatively cerebral pastime for educated men, another form of writing held a comparable mass appeal for the uncritical female reader: the novel. As Brandt notes, Kant's categorisation of *Zerstreuung* as habitual and pathological afflicts 'geistig gefährdeter Menschen, unter denen sich die Romanleserinnen besonders auszeichnen' (Brandt, p. 294). Its main symptom is 'Vergeßlichkeit (*obliviositas*)', which Kant equates with obliviousness to serving the world:

oft ist es [. . .] die Wirkung einer habituellen Zerstreuung, welche vornehmlich die Romanleserinnen anzuwandeln pflegt. Denn weil bei dieser Leserei die Absicht nur ist, sich für den Augenblick zu unterhalten, indem man weiß, daß es bloße Erdichtungen sind, die Leserin hier also volle Freiheit hat, im Lesen nach dem Laufe ihrer Einbildungskraft zu dichten, welches natürlicherweise zerstreut und die Geistesabwesenheit (Mangel der Aufmerksamkeit auf das Gegenwärtige) habituell macht: so muß das Gedächtniß dadurch unvermeidlich geschwächt werden. – Diese Übung in der Kunst die Zeit zu tödten und sich für die Welt unnütz zu machen, hintennach aber doch über die Kürze des Lebens zu klagen, ist abgesehen von der phantastischen Gemüthsstimmung, welche sie hervorbringt, einer der feindseligsten Angriffe aufs Gedächtniß. (*Anthropologie*, p. 185.)

Later, alluding to the activity of 'Romanlesen' rather than to the gender of the readership, Kant diagnoses the resulting problem of distraction as 'habituell':

Denn ob es gleich durch Zeichnung von Charakteren, die sich wirklich unter Menschen auffinden lassen (wenn gleich mit einiger Übertreibung), den Gedanken einen Zusammenhang als in einer wahren Geschichte giebt, deren Vortrag immer auf gewisse Weise systematisch sein muß, so erlaubt es doch zugleich dem Gemüth, während dem Lesen Abschweifungen (nämlich noch andere Begebenheiten als Erdichtungen) mit einzuschieben, und der Gedankengang wird fragmentarisch, so daß man die Vorstellungen eines und desselben Objects

zerstreut (*sparsim*), nicht verbunden (*conjunctim*) nach Verstandeseinheit im Gemüthe spielen läßt. (Ibid., p. 208.)

Kant's assumptions here that character sketches in prose fiction are 'systematisch' – coherent and linear – and that these represent a 'Verstandeseinheit' have been challenged as the novel has evolved. Why should we nowadays assume that a writer's behaviour is any less restrained than a reader's in privileging digressions in the narrative? The problem of distraction from 'die Vorstellungen eines und desselben Objects', where that object is the life of a protagonist, is fundamental to writing. Paul Ricœur has noted in the context of autobiography the duality of narrative identity, formed of the permanent *idem* on the one hand and the self-same, but potentially evolving *ipse* on the other, which need to be reconciled in a narrative if it is to be considered authentic.<sup>40</sup> While Ricœur's concern is with acknowledging the interplay of change and permanence in the text, Kant is troubled more by the conflation of veracity and imagination that permeate the page and the reader's mind. Niklas Luhmann notes that prior to Kant 'it was already a common topos in critiques of novelistic reading matter that the division of real reality and fictional reality was not being maintained; but precisely this point was reflected again within the novel and was set up in contrast to an authentic relation to the world, as if it were not precisely thus that one ran the risk of advising the reader by means of such reading matter that he or she should endeavour to be authentic'.<sup>41</sup> Luhmann situates Kant's line of argument between the early form of the novel and the modern mass media, in order to exemplify how we can infer 'unjust distribution' of reality in popular modes of entertainment. Kant had in mind a tradition of 'a literary genre which [a century before Kant] was called "romance" and was considerably different from what we have known as the novel since the eighteenth century – not least in its idealization of heroes and of situations under the conditions of "decorum" and "verisimilitude"' (Luhmann, p. 142, n.11). More recently, with the omnipresence of multiple forms of media, representations of reality have been dispersed further, and the reader's or viewer's participation in the events presented has become even more of a distraction from his or her mere observation of their narration: 'The difference of the inside and outside of fiction, the difference of a narrative or a film story on the one hand and an author, machinery of publication and receivers on the other, is undermined by a constant crossing of the boundary. [. . .] Communication today seems to be borne by visual knowledge no longer capable of being controlled subjectively, whose commonality owes

<sup>40</sup> Ricœur, 'L'identité narrative', *Revue des Sciences humaines*, 95: 221 (January-March 1991), 35-47 (p. 35).

<sup>41</sup> Luhmann, *The Reality Of The Mass Media*, trans. Kathleen Cross. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000 [1<sup>st</sup> German edition 1996], p. 81.

itself to the mass media and is carried along by their fashions' (ibid., p. 81f.). 'Verstandeseinheit' nowadays stands for neither the '*sparsim*' nor the '*conjunctim*', but is contingent on the mediation of the various distractions that we consume often fragmentarily from the flow of multiple sources.

Luhmann's juxtaposition of distracting reality constructions in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century novel-reading and in the manifoldings of contemporary media culture – where 'the reshaping of everything and anything into a sign of culture [. . .] is at once product and alibi of the mass media' (ibid., p. 85) – might encourage us to overlook developments in distraction between Kant and the invention of the motion picture. *Zerstreuung*, by its nature, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries follows several courses. In line with Kant's distinction of 'Dissipation' from 'Abwesenheit', John Armstrong has recently illuminated for English readers how Goethe portrays Werther's and Faust's very different pursuits of satisfaction as refusals of renunciation. Werther is too distracted by his desire for Charlotte to find true happiness: 'it is the compelling power of this fantasy – of this longed-for pleasure – which, in reality prevents him from enjoying anything'.<sup>42</sup> For Faust, however, as for Pascal, unhappiness is symbolised by confinement, despite the problems that ensue when he diverts himself: 'Our appetites, our longing for possessions and for power, our desire to make things and impose our will: all of these are not surprisingly sources of trouble. Yet without them we are like Faust in his room at the beginning – feeling that life is not worth it, that it would have been better never to have been born. To sit, as Pascal suggests, quietly in one's room might be a way of avoiding trouble, but such a life could hardly be called good' (ibid., p. 419f.). A further response to distraction is offered by Schiller, who acknowledges the need to disperse the perspectives presented in his classical dramas in order to satisfy the demands of increasingly informed audiences. At the same time, Schiller is at pains to ensure that 'die Mannigfaltigkeit [. . .] nicht zerstreuen und der Einfachheit des Ganzen keinen Abbruch tun [werde]'; as Claudia Stockinger asserts, 'daß eine idealisierende Verallgemeinerung – strukturell gesehen, die klassizistisch motivierte Verdichtung – aufgrund der zunehmenden Einsicht in die Komplexität der Weltverhältnisse kaum mehr gelingen kann, verdeutlichen die Entstehungsgeschichten gerade der dramatischen Fragmente Schillers'.<sup>43</sup> *Zerstreuung*,

<sup>42</sup> Armstrong, *Love, Life, Goethe: How To Be Happy In An Imperfect World*. London: Penguin, 2007 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 2006), p. 344.

<sup>43</sup> Claudia Stockinger, 'Dramaturgie der Zerstreuung: Schiller und das romantische Drama', in Uwe Japp, Stefan Scherer und Claudia Stockinger, eds., *Das romantische Drama. Produktive Synthese zwischen Tradition und Innovation*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000, pp. 199-225,

when tracked across responses to Schiller's dramatic work, however, has two meanings, the first of which renders it inseparable from manifolding. *Zerstreuung* is, 'zum einen, bezogen auf die poetische Praxis, ein Modernitätssignal, das die dramaturgischen Konsequenzen der gerade von Schiller immer wieder benannten neuen Unübersichtlichkeit anzeigt, zum anderen, bezogen auf die Rezeption, eine Verlustkategorie, vermittels derer die vielfältigen Formen der Ablenkung des Publikumsinteresses auf einen Nenner gebracht werden. Schillers Simplizitätsideal schließt eine Dramaturgie der Zerstreuung aus.' (Ibid.)

The demands of readers and audiences continued to grow in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as their attentiveness to characters, scenes and milieux expanded. Extensive research has recently been published on attention and distraction in the visual culture of this period,<sup>44</sup> but more analysis needs to be devoted to the distinctions between European nations in the social and political conditions during the industrial revolution, which determined the chronology and constituency of innovations that paved the way for the broadly modern (and specifically Modernist) age.

In 1890, the American William James dealt at length in his *Principles of Psychology* with attention. Within his typology, he subsumes inattentiveness in the category of 'passive intellectual attention': 'When absorbed in intellectual attention we may become so inattentive to outer things as to be "absent-minded", "abstracted" or "*distracts*." All reverie or concentrated meditation is apt to throw us into this state'.<sup>45</sup> However, while such distraction-as-*Unaufmerksamkeit* is classified as a mode of attention, distraction-as-*Zerstreuung* is kept emphatically apart. The dichotomy is all the more striking as James uses this latter German signifier (and its French counterpart, *distraction*) to maximise the contrast of this ignominious state with the ubiquity of attention. 'Every one knows what attention is', he asserts: it stands for the act of attending to something, 'and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state which in French is called *distraction*, and *Zerstreuung* in German' (ibid., p. 404). James's polarity has

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<[http://www.goethezeitportal.de/db/wiss/schiller/stockinger\\_dramaturgie.pdf](http://www.goethezeitportal.de/db/wiss/schiller/stockinger_dramaturgie.pdf)>. The first citation is from Schiller's letter to Goethe, 22 October 1799, which Stockinger incorporates in n. 35 to her remarks on p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> I am mindful in particular of the work of Jonathan Crary, who marries art, history and psychology in *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001). From the outset, Crary implies that distraction as a form of paying attention, a mode of reception of the kind articulated by Walter Benjamin is shorthand for 'a **dis**engagement from a broader field of **attraction**, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli' (p. 1; my emphasis). Crary's principal thesis is that 'modern distraction can only be understood through its reciprocal relation to the rise of attentive norms and practices' (ibid.).

<sup>45</sup> James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. I. New York: Dover, 1950, p. 418f. [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1890].

become contentious in the digital age, as we habitually defer processes of “attending to”, and are supported in our immediate fragmentary activities by the latest technologies. David M. Levy speculates that ‘perhaps even more of a problem than the loss of attentional acuity is that we seem to have so little control over it; that we are often unable to summon it when we most want it or need it’.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, ‘current computer screens may also promote patterns of attenuate, fragmented reading’, prompting us to print out longer documents for future reference, while we remain beholden to the screen ‘for shorter bursts of reading as well as for reading which is highly interactive’ (ibid., p. 208f.). No wonder, thus, that in the evolution of the digital library only the first two of the three on-screen processes of search, acquisition and reading have as yet been substantial subjects of research; reading increasingly represents an exclusion from attention, which, as William James saw it, ‘implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others’ (James, p. 404). Reading requires this level of withdrawal, or retreat, for which ‘the visually cluttered, multithreaded desktops on which we work’ (Levy, p. 209) are not conducive.

Michael Hagner summarises the transformation from stable attention at the start of the nineteenth century to its dispersal brought about by technology at the start of the twentieth. Tellingly, he avoids referring to distraction in negative terms, preferring instead to demarcate a new kind of attention:

Around 1800, attention made us the masters of exploring ourselves and the world that surrounds us. Around 1900, the space between ourselves and the world was filled by apparatuses, instruments, technologies and all sorts of entertainment. In this situation, the destabilization of attention became an auto-therapeutic device. First formulated within the realm of psychophysics, the notion of freefloating attention was transformed into a cultural cipher. The emergence and establishment of this new type of attention does not imply that the former one was out-of-date around 1900. On the contrary, both types were related to each other. The conservative critic Max Nordau based his critical judgment of fin-de-siècle culture on the claim that voluntary attention was a sign of sanity and of educated middle-class order, whereas distraction, superficial and free-floating attention was a symptom of fatigue, degeneration and of an inhibited development of the nervous system.<sup>47</sup>

Hagner does not specify who he means by ‘us’ in this context of socio-cultural manifestations of attention. The pre-industrial or early industrial world that surrounded the

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<sup>46</sup> Levy, ‘I Read the News Today, Oh Boy: Reading and Attention in Digital Libraries’, *Proceedings of the second ACM international conference on Digital libraries* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States, 1997), 202-211 (p. 203) <<http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/263690.263817>>.

<sup>47</sup> Hagner, ‘Toward a History of Attention in Culture and Science’, *MLN*, 118 (2003): 670–687 (p. 686). Hagner alludes to Max Nordau’s *Entartung*, Vol. I [3<sup>rd</sup> ed.]. Berlin: Duncker, 1896, pp. 102-106.



observer of 1800 was reshaped over the course of the next century, not only for residents of rapidly expanding towns and cities but also for travellers as transport networks were constructed. Thus, the sense of 'space between ourselves and the world' that Hagner believes to have persisted was reduced as well as filled. The births of psychology and sociology and their attempts to situate the human subject in the world contributed to this reduction in space. Further generalisations would be arbitrary without consideration of the geographical and political differences between the rates of industrial development and any concomitant evolution in intellectual and leisure pursuits in individual countries: Britain's industrial revolution began before those of its neighbours, for example, yet its secular university system only emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century, making any parallels with, say, Germany's growth superficial. Nevertheless, by the end of that century throughout the western world, work and leisure spaces had diversified comparably; and these sites were occupied by newly proliferating and prolific middle classes.

Sociological discussion of *Zerstreuung* as entertainment is prominent in Georg Simmel's analysis of leisure time, leisure habits and reconfigurations of consciousness among the increasing numbers of salaried workers in the German cities, in a study published in 1903, before the advent of cinema as a mass medium, but under the conditions in which it was to thrive two decades later.<sup>48</sup> For Simmel (1858-1918), as David Harvey points out, 'the social spaces of distraction and display become as vital to urban culture as the spaces of working and living'.<sup>49</sup> Settings that offer *distraction* are thus sources of *attraction* to consumers. These locations exert a gravitational pull, an invitation to mass traction or locomotion. Fashion, electric light, photography and, later, cinema represent *Zerstreuung* in terms of their *diffusion* as different sources offering different sensations. Nevertheless, in their *profusion* in the cityscape, these sources of mass entertainment attain a powerful fusion through which their mass appeal is measured. For Simmel, the city has become 'eines jener großen historischen Gebilde, in denen sich die entgegengesetzten, das Leben umfassenden Strömungen wie zu gleichen Rechten zusammenfinden und entfalten' (Simmel, op. cit.). 'Distraction' here underscores the entertaining function of these streams,<sup>50</sup> where *Unterhaltung* is a common synonym for *Zerstreuung*. The individual's

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Georg Simmel, 'Die Grosstädte und das Geistesleben', in Hans Geser, Markus Roth & Nora Zapata, eds., *Sociology in Switzerland Presents Georg Simmel Online*, Soziologisches Institut der Universität Zürich <<http://www.socio.ch/sim/verschiedenes/1903/grossstaedte.htm>> (originally in *Die Grossstadt. Vorträge und Aufsätze zur Städteausstellung: Jahrbuch der Gehe-Stiftung Dresden*, 9, 1903, pp. 185-206).

<sup>49</sup> David Harvey, *Consciousness And The Urban Experience*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1985, p. 256.

<sup>50</sup> Our understanding of 'Strömungen' and 'streams' should also absorb the appropriation in one British strand of cultural studies of the English signifier 'flow'. 'Flow' denotes any of three modes of televisual dissemination which came to dominate the second half of the last century: programme scheduling,

shaping of experience has become subordinate to irresistible passive consumption by the masses: 'das Leben wird ihr einerseits unendlich leicht gemacht, indem Anregungen, Interessen, Ausfüllungen von Zeit und Bewusstsein sich ihr von allen Seiten anbieten und sie wie in einem Strome tragen, in dem es kaum noch eigener Schwimmbewegungen bedarf' (ibid.). 'Distraction' does not convey the allure of such an easy life: instead, it polarises the sense of 'attraction' that is attenuated where consumers follow fashion. Not until Simmel's student Siegfried Kracauer (1889-1966) expanded the dynamics of *Zerstreuung* in a similar social context to his teacher could 'distraction' be validated comprehensively in the (German) metropolis.

One attempt in today's academy to validate the currency of 'distraction' that centres on Kracauer is to be found in an overview of European cinema for Anglophone readers, which requires development if it is to hold value for scholars concerned with language and literature. Ian Aitken asserts ambiguously that 'the view of the modern condition as one characterised by fragmentation and ambiguity led directly to the emergence of the concept of "distraction" as a major critical concern of the [interwar] period. This amounted to the theorisation of a new form of visual and sensory experience of the modern environment, one in which an unfocused "distracted" mode of understanding and consumption prevailed. This distracted form of experience inevitably led to an impoverished and "abstract" encounter with the self and the world, and further reinforced instrumental rationality.'<sup>51</sup> While Aitken's suggestion of a singular theorisation bound up with a singular "distracted" mode is explicable within the parameters of his study of cinema, rather than in the cross-disciplinary contexts of philosophy or cultural studies, it is harder to accept that distraction became a concern to film studies overall, or to the Frankfurt school with which Kracauer was associated, only between the wars as a *direct* result of contemporary views of the condition of life, given the volume and quality of writing on attention and distraction that had accrued since the Enlightenment. Furthermore, Aitken misleadingly claims that distraction was 'originally a negative term, defined in opposition to the contemplative forms of concentration and more unified modes of experience normally associated with the high arts' (ibid., p. 19), thus suggesting that distraction only started to be conceptualised

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continuity, and the "flow within the flow" of words and images as they appear; cf. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. London: Routledge, 3rd ed. 2003 [1974], p. 77ff. In my wider study, I intend to incorporate an analysis of Williams's treatment of distraction within and resulting from this flow, and to contrast his view of this distraction in popular entertainment as an empowerment of human agency over both history and technology (cf. Roger Silverstone's preface to the third edition, p. xi) with Adorno's relatively one-dimensional view of distraction in musical, non-visual flowing forms.

<sup>51</sup> Aitken, *European Film Theory And Cinema: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001, p. 18.

seriously when it was opposed to *Versenkung* and *Sammlung* by Benjamin and Adorno. Nevertheless, Aitken rightly acknowledges that ‘the notion of distraction eventually took on more positive and radical connotations during the 1920s, becoming identified with non-bourgeois, or proletarian modes of experience, and with alternatives to totalising systems of rationality.’ We must trace for ourselves how distraction has evolved and been disseminated in subsequent decades, as Aitken’s assessment is stubbornly frozen in Kracauer’s time.<sup>52</sup> Not writing for language specialists, Aitken avoids alluding to the German *Zerstreuung*; rather, he oversimplifies the varying interoperability (or dialectic) of distraction as an outcome and as a process by directing us solely to Kracauer’s iconic ‘Kult der Zerstreuung’ essay, where distraction is ‘found’ as ‘both the product of abstraction and the mode of cognition through which the mass public can understand and transform their own experiences’ (ibid., p. 170).

Kracauer, the author of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* cinema review articles ‘Kult der Zerstreuung’ (4 March 1926), ‘Not und Zerstreuung’ (16 July 1931), ‘Gepflegte Zerstreuung’ (3 August 1931), and ‘Ablenkung und Aufbau’ (27 & 28 July 1932), as well as of an extended study of *Die Angestellten* (1930), which was subtitled in its much later English translation *Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*,<sup>53</sup> constantly emphasises the cultural embeddedness of *Zerstreuung*. Once established in popular culture, cinema-going, beyond the films themselves, became a totalising event: ‘Aus dem Kino ist ein glänzendes, revueartiges Gebilde herausgekrochen: das Gesamtkunstwerk der Effekte. Es entlädt sich vor sämtlichen Sinnen mit sämtlichen Mitteln’.<sup>54</sup> In his review of the film *Nie Wieder Liebe*, Kracauer writes disdainfully of ‘reine Zerstreuung’ und ‘pure

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<sup>52</sup> Aitken’s remarks in a later chapter are a mere repetition, distracting rather than edifying the reader: ‘As already mentioned in Chapter 3, the concept of distraction employed by Kracauer amounted to the theorisation of a form of visual and sensory experience of the modern environment, in which an unfocused ‘distracted’ mode of being prevailed, which led, in turn, to a sterile encounter between the self and the world. Although originally a negative term, defined in opposition to the more contemplative and unified modes of experience associated with the high arts, the notion of distraction eventually took on more radical connotations during the 1920s, becoming identified with non-bourgeois, or proletarian modes of experience, and with alternatives to totalising systems of rationality’ (ibid., p. 169). Given the lack of substantiation, are we to assume that only the English term ‘distraction’ was negative, or does Aitken’s point relate to *Zerstreuung*, too? Or was only the associated *notion* negative? We wonder what origins Aitken assumes distraction to have, in the context of a study that commences with Russian formalism, but which belatedly acknowledges the influence on Kracauer of Kant: ‘there is an inverted affinity between Kracauer’s assertion that mythic thought and instrumental rationality distort the operations of reason and the imagination, and the Kantian model of the harmony of the faculties within aesthetic experience, in which the role of the understanding is to regulate the imagination, and to cause it to seek order within nature’ (ibid., p. 171). Aitken refers us here to Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, rather than to the explicit treatment of *distractio* that we have analysed from the *Anthropology*.

<sup>53</sup> Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty And Distraction in Weimar Germany*, trans. Quintin Hoare. London: Verso, 1998.

<sup>54</sup> Kracauer, ‘Kult der Zerstreuung. Über die Berliner Lichtspielhäuser’ (1926), in *Das Ornament der Masse*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963, pp. 311-317 (p. 312).

Zerstreuung', and questions the value of discussing this kind of experience at all: 'Soll ich seinen Inhalt, der dazu bestimmt ist, eine Stunde lang zu unterhalten und hinterher einer ähnlichen Belanglosigkeit wegen radikal vergessen zu werden, ernsthaft zergliedern? Vielleicht ist es nicht unnützlich, ihn, der aus dem Nichts gleich ins Nichts schlüpfen will, einen Augenblick festzuhalten'.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, he persists in surveying such distractions, as he had long since accepted that 'die Zerstreuung gelangt in ihnen [specifically, the shows at Berlin's *Paläste*] zu ihrer Kultur. Sie gelten der *Masse*.' ('Kult der Zerstreuung', p. 312). This remark proves how *Zerstreuung* in Modernism became both an operation – diffusing new, multi-dimensional art forms to large audiences – and a cultural genre in itself, especially in film and architecture. These modes find fusion not just in Kracauer's essay on Berlin's *Lichtspielhäuser* but across his oeuvre.<sup>56</sup> With the rise of consumerism among the salaried (lower-)middle classes, *Zerstreuung* became a unity and thus lost its true meaning as a scattered and incohesive phenomenon. Kracauer describes this loss happening 'exemplarisch' in the metropolitan cinemas: 'Denn, rufen sie auch zur Zerstreuung auf, so rauben sie ihr doch sogleich wieder dadurch den Sinn, daß sie die Mannigfaltigkeit der Effekte, die ihrem Wesen nach voneinander isoliert zu werden verlangen, zur "künstlerischen" Einheit zusammenschweißen, die bunte Reihe der Äußerlichkeiten in ein gestalthaftes Ganzes pressen möchten' (ibid., p. 315). Kracauer equates *Zerstreuung* with culture: distraction's 'Versammlungsorte' are deemed 'ein würdiger Aufenthalt' (ibid., p. 311), as their 'architektonische Rahmen schon neigt zur Betonung der Würde, die den oberen Kunstinstituten eignete' (ibid., p. 315). Kracauer therefore paves the way for his near-contemporary Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) to elevate the status of *Zerstreuung*, as well as to expose its shortcomings as a synonym for distraction. However, Kracauer does not necessarily polarise the traditional high culture of *Sammlung* – the intense, individualised contemplation of separate works of art – in the

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<sup>55</sup> Kracauer, 'Gepflegte Zerstreuung: Eine grundsätzliche Erwägung' (1931), in *Von Caligari zu Hitler*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978, pp. 500-503 (p. 501). We should assume that Kracauer's 'Zerstreuung' signifies distraction both in the sense of light entertainment and of diversion from serious critical concerns because of his documentation in a piece the following year of a shift in the Universum Film AG's (Ufa's) brand values in its new series of 25 films, as announced by the studio's production manager at its conference. The new strand 'wendet sich ab von der Befriedigung des Ablenkungsbedürfnisses beim Publikum und muß dazu übergehen, dem Aufbaugedanken Rechnung zu tragen. Wir kommen dazu, Filme, ganz gleich, ob ernsten oder heiteren Charakters, zu schaffen, in denen nicht einfach ein ablenkender, heiterer Vorgang gezeigt wird, sondern in denen Fragen gestellt werden, die wir beantworten müssen' (Kracauer, citing 'Direktor Correll', 'Ablenkung oder Aufbau? Zum neuen Ufa-Programm' [1932], in *Von Caligari zu Hitler*, op. cit., pp. 550-53 [pp. 552-53]). However, where 'wir' refers to the producers, no evidence is given of any requirement for *viewers* to respond to uncomfortable subject matter in a production heralded in its own right as an 'ernsten und nachdenklichen Film' any more actively than these same viewers were expected to engage with the previous, 'leichteren Art' of material on general release.

<sup>56</sup> Kracauer studied and then practised architecture before changing his career to journalism in the early 1920s.

way that Henri Band suggests: ‘der Begriff der Zerstreuung [. . .] entspricht letztlich einer alttestamentarisch-metaphorischen Gegenüberstellung von “Sammlung” als Einkehr, Besinnung auf Höheres und Bewahrung einer einheitlichen Form und Ordnung und “Zerstreuung” als Ablenkung von diesen Werten, als Opiat und Agens der Auflösung gemeinschaftsbindender Normen. Daß Kracauer zumeist den Begriff der Zerstreuung gegenüber dem der Unterhaltung oder des Vergnügens vorzieht, ist dieser kulturkritischen Konnotationen geschuldet’.<sup>57</sup> The institution of cinema that Kracauer surveys ‘beliebt das Gehobene und *Sakrale*, als umfinge er Gebilde von ewiger Dauer; noch ein Schritt weiter, und die Weihkerzen leuchten’ (Kracauer, ‘Kult’, p. 315). While Kracauer’s (untypical) sarcasm here conveys disbelief and thus does not necessarily invalidate Band’s differentiation, both commentators remind us that the conditions of reception contribute to our evaluation of a cultural product. For Kracauer, social space shapes the cultural experience in which art such as cinema is presented.

Furthermore, in its synonymy with *Ablenkung*, *Zerstreuung* deviates from *Sammlung*. The more that *Zerstreuung* becomes habitual – or even turns into ‘die Zerstreuungssucht’ (Kracauer, ‘Kult’, p. 313) – the more problematical meta-*Ablenkung*, or distraction from the concomitant state of *Unaufmerksamkeit*, becomes. In his study of *Die Angestellten*, Kracauer cites a shorthand typist who expresses her aversion to serious conversation during her leisure time: “Ernste Unterhaltungen”, sagte sie, “zerstreuen nur und lenken von der Umwelt ab, die man genießen möchte”. Wenn einem ernstem Gespräch zerstreuende Wirkungen beigemessen werden, ist es mit der Zerstreuung unerbittlich ernst’.<sup>58</sup> Thus, both the calibre and perception of *Zerstreuung* for the ordinary consumer differ from those of the cultural analyst, and we must exercise caution in validating this term according to any single definition without emphasising its socio-historical context.

### **Reproductions of Distraction in Response to Benjamin and Adorno**

Despite Manfred Schneider’s and Samuel Weber’s recognition of the heritage preceding *Zerstreuung* in the twentieth century, other commentators on the same source material – the philosophies of Walter Benjamin, especially as expounded in the essay ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’ – have persisted in mechanically equating *Zerstreuung* with distraction. Those who omit to gloss either the

<sup>57</sup> Henri Band, *Mittelschichten und Massenkultur: Siegfried Kracauers publizistische Auseinandersetzung mit der populären Kultur und der Kultur der Mittelschichten in der Weimar Republik*. Berlin: Lukas, 1999, p. 66.

<sup>58</sup> Kracauer, *Die Angestellten*, in *Schriften*, Vol. I. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971, p. 283ff.

German term or its English translation perpetuate the canonical status of Benjamin's oeuvre across the academic humanities not so much as a fragmented body of resonant yet incomplete enquiries but as a series of hermeneutic keys, among which *Zerstreuung*/distraction features remarkably prominently for a topic interwoven into only a handful of Benjamin's pages. *Zerstreuung*, even more than distraction is anything but a straightforward concept to pinpoint in its own right, let alone to translate; it is problematised further when it is opposed to equally problematical and arbitrarily translated German terms that convey concentration (especially in relation to attention or contemplation).

In Benjamin's 'Kunstwerk' essay, the *Zerstreuung* engendered by recorded images has further evolved to become a mode of participation in a kind of decentred intersubjectivity – quite the opposite of the displacement involved in Kracauer's typist's *Zerstreuung*.<sup>59</sup> Three Benjamin specialists, Howard Eiland, Graeme Gilloch and Lutz Koepnick, who survey *Zerstreuung* more widely across Benjamin's oeuvre, do not problematise its translation as 'distraction'. Equating Modernist *Zerstreuung* with distraction has become canonical; thankfully, however, one commentator at least has succinctly specified an apt construal of the term. Michael Taussig, in a study of tactility, usefully acknowledges the apperceptive mode of distraction as 'the type of flitting and barely conscious peripheral-vision perception unleashed with great vigor by modern life at the crossroads of the city, the capitalist market, and modern technology. The idealtype here would not be God but movies and advertising, and its field of expertise is the modern everyday'.<sup>60</sup> With this definition in mind, I shall now deal with Eiland, Gilloch and Koepnick in turn before investigating some of Koepnick's further reference points, in order to illuminate Benjamin's sense of distraction as what should best be summarised as *dispersed dissemination*, to which I shall return following this aptly circuitous series of comparisons.

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<sup>59</sup> Three versions of this essay were produced between 1935 and 1939 but they were only fully published in German posthumously. My quotations are from the second version (composed 1935-36), which contains the most detail on *Zerstreuung*: in *Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften* 7:1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1989, pp. 471-508. Among the plethora of commentaries on this essay that seize upon various intertextualities emerging from Benjamin's terminology, Rodolphe Gasché's 'Objective Diversions' (op. cit.) stresses the sense of shock that compromises the viewer's assimilation of the stream of images as being in itself a shared element of the cinema-going experience. Shock catalyses multi-modal distraction (as diversion and dispersal of attention as well as confusion of mind): 'Not only does art in the age of mechanical reproduction deflect from the object, distract, as it were, the collective subject of the critical reception of the new art forms is a distracted beholder. His associative mechanisms are interrupted by shock, and although he responds to the shocks that assail him through "a heightened presence of the mind", he does so in a distracted manner. The collective subject, consequently, is neither a substantial nor a formal centre that would ground its autonomy. It is a distracted subject in all senses of the word.' (Gasché, p. 194).

<sup>60</sup> Taussig, 'Tactility And Distraction', *Cultural Anthropology*, 6:2 (May 1991), 147-153 (p. 148).

Eiland, one of Benjamin's American translators, acknowledges that the model of *Zerstreuung*, regardless of its precise definition or its English translation, is not rigid. He notes 'a certain inconsistency [. . .] in Benjamin's handling of the concept of distraction'; and he warns 'it should be kept in mind that, especially in the case of the work of art essay and *The Arcades*, the notion of distraction operates in a particularly slippery manner, such as very likely makes this one of the more elusive of Benjaminian topoi'.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, within the *Arcades* project, Benjamin alludes to two signifiers, 'Zerstreuung' and 'Zerstreuungheit' in the context of the task of the collector; Eiland cites this juxtaposition of 'the struggle against dispersion [*Zerstreuung*]', which constitutes 'the most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects', with 'the confusion, [. . .] the scatter [*Zerstreuungheit*] in which the things of the world are found'.<sup>62</sup> For the translator, of all scholars, to emphasise these quite differently connoted English signifiers and to note their more similar but nevertheless separate German *-ung* and *-heit* counterparts, indicates to the reader an agglomeration of distractions rather than the neat conglomeration of 'ontological' and 'epistemological' distractions that Eiland attempts to ringfence. Eiland's and Benjamin's intimation here of an axiom of distraction as a summative commonplace plotted within a frame is not helpful when the framelines – of dispersion/*Zerstreuung* and (the more negative) scatter(edness)/*Zerstreuungheit* – are themselves assertions of non-linearity rather than linear axes within which a collector operates, but between which no single point of collectedness can be reached. Eiland proceeds by positing 'ontological scatter' as being 'accessible to an intensively scattered perception', and by situating at the confluence of these two conditions 'the articulation of dispersion' (Eiland, p. 63). This articulation is most obviously Benjamin's own achievement in his dissemination of diverse aesthetics of collecting, architecture, spectatorship and wandering – not to mention the life-writing impulse that draws these together. In addition, the articulation of 'the challenge of discovering a form commensurate with the entropic or centrifugal tendency of modern experience' (ibid.) and of the aesthetic value of pursuing the challenge itself is dispersed across the work of diffuse practitioners. To isolate, say, the literary from the graphical, musical, theatrical or cinematic in its concentration on this challenge would thus seem arbitrary. Yet, interdisciplinarity demands an integration of modes of articulation that is inconsistent with the 'dis-integrated form' (ibid.) that the topos of dispersion represents. Eiland steers us towards evaluating the particular combination of modes of distraction in

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<sup>61</sup> Howard Eiland, 'Reception in Distraction', *boundary 2*, 30:1 (Spring 2003), 51-66 (p. 52) <<http://web.mit.edu/lit/www/spotlightarticles/distraction.html>>.

<sup>62</sup> Eiland, p. 62, citing his translation (with Kevin McLaughlin) of Benjamin's Convolute 4a.1 of *The Arcades Project* (originally *Das Passagen-Werk*).

literature, Benjamin's favoured form for his own practice, in which 'an articulation of dispersion' is 'a possible purchase on what is meant by "literary montage" in *The Arcades Project*' (ibid.). 'Dispersion' and 'scatter(edness)' become, to all intents and purposes, coterminous in Eiland's rhetoric. Yet, by avoiding explicit synonymy with 'distraction', he enables us to trace a meta-distraction in artistic responses to what these terms signify, and thereby to alert us to our own 'reception in distraction'.

Three of Eiland's further observations should prefigure both our reading of the 'Kunstwerk' essay and any equivalence we grant Benjamin's *Zerstreuung* to any particular denotation of distraction. Firstly, by quoting from Benjamin's third version of his essay a citation from the French author Georges Duhamel about being overcome by the moving image, Eiland situates distraction not only as the convergence of *Zerstreuung* and *Verstörung* at the point where the spectator perceives its effect but also as *interruption* – which happens to be a synonym in French for distraction in the sense of a loss of attention: 'the train of associations in the person wishing to contemplate one of these images is immediately *interrupted* by new images, and this, Benjamin goes on to say, constitutes the shock effect of film' (Eiland, p. 56). Secondly, Eiland argues conveniently that in the 'Kunstwerk' essay, 'distraction, in a properly modern context, must itself be understood dialectically – that is to say, beyond the simple opposition of distraction and concentration' (p. 57). A concept that is predicated on complex conflict can surely only be signified by an arbitrary choice of terminology. While *Zerstreuung* as manifolding conveys a sense of multiplication, if not doubling, such qualities are not evident in distraction. Thirdly, Eiland endows distraction with the duality of 'dis-' and '-traction', although he does not comment on this. On the one hand, *distraction* conveys and promotes disregard to its students; on the other, it sets attention in motion, exemplified both by the locomotion of *flâneurs* and by consumers perusing arcades: 'the opposition now would seem to be between *mere* distraction and, shall we say, productive distraction – between distraction as a skewing of attention, or as abandonment to diversion, and distraction as a spur to new ways of perceiving. In either case, a certain wandering or dispersion makes itself felt' (p. 55).

The infrastructure, or "housing", of institutions such as cinema and shopping belies – or even exacerbates – a state of homelessness in the *Zerstreuung* which they encourage. To this end, Graeme Gilloch, in analysing Modernist 'distraction' as one of the key *Critical*



*Constellations* to be extrapolated from Benjamin's oeuvre,<sup>63</sup> compares Kracauer's and Benjamin's approaches to *Zerstreuung*, emphasising Kracauer's treatment in 'Kult der Zerstreuung' of 'a form of emotional and ideological compensation for the bureaucratized, spiritually "homeless" condition endured by the new mass of metropolitan white-collar workers'. Where home life was not built up sufficiently to complement or ease the unstimulating and confining experience of employment in tertiary industry, the role of leisure time and facilities expanded exponentially. Leisure became "housed" within the metropolitan superstructure, not only in cinemas, bars and shops but within the planned developments of cities, their grids of streets and transportation systems, thus facilitating the *transition* between working, living and leisure environments in terms of the short distances and journey times between them. Yet, the picture palaces were furnished in such a way as to distract their visitors from the *transitory* nature of their experience of the amenity, which was itself supplanted on each visit by the transitory experience of each film screened and its appeal to the audience's senses.

Lutz Koepnick's analysis of *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power*<sup>64</sup> is especially conspicuous in its lack of a detailed breakdown of either the connotations of German terminology relating to distraction or the author's own choice of English translations. In identifying the precedence of modern visual culture over oral traditions, Koepnick implies its paradoxical aesthetic appeal to the spectator, who is 'attracted to what diverts' (p. 155). Koepnick's context is the fragmented form of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century journalism, which 'pictures and fragments the world through snapshot-like information in order to divert the reader' (p. 153); thus, the act of attracting the reader-viewer's attention through a combination of headline text and photography results in distraction.

Koepnick proceeds to refer ambiguously to 'visual distraction', in the context of the world fairs and Parisian arcades scrutinised in Benjamin's *Pasagenwerk*, and to their 'distracted subjects' (p. 166). While the wandering voyeurs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century contrast with the 'daily living-room routine' of 'contemporary couch potatoes', their parallel subjection to 'the image-based clash of different temporalities and incompatible social topographies' (p. 213) is the corollary of alluring spectacles – where early Modernist film provides an exhibition-like experience that 'directly solicits spectator attention', as Tom Gunning identifies in 'The Cinema of Attractions' (op. cit., p. 231) – and the equation of spectatorship with

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<sup>63</sup> Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations*. Cambridge: Polity, 2002, p. 279 n. 74.

<sup>64</sup> Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

consumerism. Yet, Koepnick's repeated references to Benjamin's 'category of distraction' – 'celebratory and deterministic' in one of the five allusions over three pages (p. 220); 'postauratic' in another (p. 222) – point, in the absence of firm definition, to the enduring impact of Benjamin's treatment of *Zerstreuung* as *diversification*. In the arena of gender politics, Koepnick cites Patrice Petro's study *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany*,<sup>65</sup> which is notable not only for its identification of a paradigm shift in Benjamin's discourse from aura to distraction (Koepnick, p. 222), but also for its recognition of Modernist cinema as a turning-point for women's involvement in the discourses of entertainment. In particular, Weimar melodrama disengaged male intellectuals but activated female cultural expression. Petro's treatment of distraction, while slanted towards a gendered approach, is reliable as she takes and compares her references from the heterogeneous contexts of Kracauer, Benjamin and Heidegger (and from Derrida's response to the latter). Moreover, she signifies in her use of inverted commas the status of 'distraction' as a *representation* of both a mode of perception and its effects.<sup>66</sup> To appreciate the importance of distraction beyond Koepnick's framing of its manifestations in Modernist theory, we should return to Petro's observation that the effects on audiences of technological advances endure most specifically within the context of cinema: 'Contemporary film theorists retain the assumption that film technology so profoundly alters perception and experience that it completely reorganizes the spectator's relationship to space, vision and structures of desire' (Petro, p. 120). Yet, rather than either elucidate his own definition of 'distraction' or signpost this specific assertion of Petro's that distraction is a multiple reconfiguration or renegotiation, Koepnick contrasts the empowering status of 'Benjamin's category of postauratic distraction' with Adorno's negative and dismissive interpretation of an enslaving 'postauratic inattentiveness' (Koepnick, p. 221). Koepnick thus posits distraction-as-*Unaufmerksamkeit* as a dialectical response to distraction-as-*Zerstreuung*. His inclusion of Adorno's philosophy steers the discussion away from *Zerstreuung* as spectacle and, in its synonymity with *Unterhaltung* (entertainment), towards *Unaufmerksamkeit*.

Negatively prefixed, like *distraction*, *Un-aufmerksamkeit* presupposes absences. While, as we have seen, *Zerstreuung* tends to denote absentmindedness, and *Verstörtheit* the

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<sup>65</sup> Princeton University Press, 1989; its most relevant chapter for Koepnick's analysis and the present study was previously published as 'Modernity and Mass Culture: Contours of a Discourse on Sexuality in Early Theories of Perception and Representation', *New German Critique*, 40 (Winter 1987), 115-146; this is the version from which I shall henceforth cite.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. p. 124, where she amply nuances the arbitrariness of 'the notions of "contemplation" and "distraction"' (my emphasis).

disturbance or loss of a presence of mind, Koepnick regards inattentiveness in modern mass media consumption as identified by Adorno as a condition in which the distinctiveness of discrete cultural objects is missing. This kind of *Unaufmerksamkeit* is a form of subjugating connectedness that counters the fragmentation of traditional contemplative rituals: 'distraction transforms disconnected parts into fetishes in front of which "consumers become temple slaves"'.<sup>67</sup> An audience distracted in this way by entertainment as a sum of parts sacrifices control over varying the attention it pays to any of these parts individually. Raymond Williams wrote, before the multi-channel age, of the behavioural effects on society of the reproduction of drama: 'Fiction; acting; idle dreaming and vicarious spectacle; the simultaneous satisfaction of sloth and appetite; distraction from distraction by distraction'.<sup>68</sup> Williams had identified this interminable distraction process in a previous study (not of writing but of television!) as having emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, when the theatre of August Strindberg revealed an 'interesting and complex relationship between dramatic structures and the new technological means of production' that was to intensify in early German experimental cinema. The roots of this relationship can be discerned in Shakespeare's innovative juxtaposition in *Troilus and Cressida* of the dialogue between Diomedes and Cressida meeting in secret with that of Ulysses and Troilus who overhear them, where Ulysses remarks to Troilus 'You flow to great distraction'.<sup>69</sup> Adorno, in common with his near-contemporaries in Germany, as well as with Williams and the most recent generations of media theorists, problematises the confluence of entertainment, distraction and concentration. Unlike them, however, Adorno's attitude towards cinema is dismissive: to him, the "talkies" 'sind so angelegt, daß ihre adäquate Auffassung zwar Prompttheit, Beobachtungsgabe, Versiertheit erheischt, daß sie aber die denkende Aktivität des Betrachters geradezu verbieten, wenn er nicht die vorbeihuschenden Fakten versäumen will'.<sup>70</sup> Television, too, Adorno believes, is harmful to its viewer, as it engenders a false sense of proximity to its presentations rather than prompting critical distance from them. Koepnick, in *Framing Attention*, cites Adorno's 'Prolog zum Fernsehen' from 1953, and adds that 'television [. . .] produces forms of distraction that subject the viewer to improved strategies of discipline and manipulation: "In

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<sup>67</sup> Koepnick, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 221; he cites Adorno in 'On The Fetish Character In Music And The Regression Of Listening', in *Adorno, The Culture Industry: Seven Essays On Modern Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein. London: Routledge, 1991, p. 39.

<sup>68</sup> Williams, *Writing In Society*. London: Verso, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1991 [1983], p. 13.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Williams, *Television*, p. 54 (on the 'large-scale public dramatic action' of early cinema), and *Writing*, p. 38 (on Shakespeare; cf. *Troilus and Cressida*, Act V, Scene II).

<sup>70</sup> Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* [1969 edition; first ed. 1947], Offene Uni Kassel <[http://www.offene-uni.de/archiv/textz/textz\\_phil/dialektik\\_aufklaerung.pdf](http://www.offene-uni.de/archiv/textz/textz_phil/dialektik_aufklaerung.pdf)>, p. 53.

that television awakens and visually represents what preconceptually slumbers in the viewer, it at the same time prescribes them [sic!] how to behave”.<sup>71</sup>

Another of Adorno's prominent discussions of distraction focuses on the mechanical reproduction of music rather than on audio-visual media. Writing in the USA in English in 1941, far from rendering popular musical entertainment and inattentiveness coterminously, he situates distraction as operating in parallel to the absence of attention: ‘The frame of mind to which popular music originally appealed, on which it feeds, and which it perpetually reinforces, is simultaneously one of distraction and inattention. Listeners are distracted from the demands of reality by entertainment which does not demand attention either.’<sup>72</sup> Adorno considered this form of diversion to provide an undemanding one-dimensional escape from the effort of navigating multi-dimensional reality: in particular, an escape from negotiating one's place in a competitive society where subjugation to the market forces and mass culture that had grown to dictate the lives of urban professionals had become the norm. This negotiation had once been engendered by concentrated contemplation of serious art, and later by navigating new configurations in work and leisure time, as identified by Simmel and Kracauer. By the 1930s, however, cultural engagement was forced out by concentration of a new kind that continues to be consolidated to this day: namely, the highly concentrated cultural production in the industries of mainstream popular culture, where a few major players compete to dominate the mass market and hook consumers with easily identifiable and digestible wares. These products of distraction offer instant gratification individually, but they are too standardised and ephemeral to merit sustained commentary at any critical distance, other than typology and socio-political analysis – which Adorno combines in his philosophy. For Adorno, ‘distraction is bound to the present mode of production, to the rationalized and mechanized process of labor to which, directly or indirectly, masses are subject. This mode of production, which engenders fears and anxiety about unemployment, loss of income, war, has its "non-productive" correlate in entertainment; that is, relaxation which does not involve the effort of concentration at all. People want to have fun. A fully concentrated and conscious experience of art is possible only to those whose lives do not put such a strain on them that in their spare time they want relief from both boredom and effort

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<sup>71</sup> Koepnick, *Framing Attention*, p. 231; he translates Adorno's remark from ‘Prolog zum Fernsehen’ in *Eingriffe: Neun kritische Modelle*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963, pp. 69-80 [p. 77].

<sup>72</sup> Adorno, ‘Popular Music in Leisure Time’, in *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), pp. 451-460 (p. 451); originally published in ‘On Popular Music’, *Studies in Philosophy & Social Science* 9 (11): 38, 1941.

simultaneously. The whole sphere of cheap commercial entertainment reflects this dual desire' (ibid., p. 451).

Furthermore, Adorno and Max Horkheimer bemoan in their *Dialektik der Aufklärung* the 'Reproduktion des Immergleichen' (*Dialektik*, p. 56). Although the semantic connection of 'Reproduktion' to our understanding of *Zerstreuung* as dissemination contributes to the association of contemporary entertainment with distraction, the relationship of the 'Immergleichen' to distraction is cemented when *Unaufmerksamkeit* is added to the formula. Producers and consumers are inattentive to the possibilities of novelty in form and content, as minor variations on the same product continue to be supplied and demanded: 'Das Neue der massenkulturellen Phase gegenüber der spätliberalen ist der Ausschluß des Neuen. Die Maschine rotiert auf der gleichen Stelle' (ibid.). The age of mechanical reproduction ushered in the pursuit of mechanical reduction for the masses; the shrinkage in size of high fidelity recordings and devices attracts and distracts today's fashion-conscious consumers just as the technological innovations of the mid-twentieth century shifted critical attention away from the works they reproduced: 'Daß ihre charakteristischen Neuerungen durchweg bloß in Verbesserungen der Massenreproduktion bestehen, ist dem System nicht äußerlich. Mit Grund heftet sich das Interesse ungezählter Konsumenten an die Technik, nicht an die starr repetierten, ausgehöhlten und halb schon preisgegebenen Inhalte' (ibid.).

Popular music as characterised by Adorno, its subsequent evolution having been marked by the concentrations of synthesised instrumentation and compressed dynamics, is not the only form of cultural production that has become concentrated in such a way as to minimise fluctuation in its consumers' putatively limited attention spans. Take, for example, the current ubiquity of podcasting, in which various kinds of content, including academic lectures, are offered in a condensed form, often by individuals rather than via powerful corporations in the entertainment industry (with the exception of the internet service providers who provide the channel of distribution): in this instance, power has been scattered far beyond mainstream industry structures. Listening and writing in an age of low-fidelity, monaural reproduction, Adorno did not foresee the double-edged sword of empowerment that was to be granted to consumers by technologies such as the remote

control panel and, very recently, on-demand streaming services.<sup>73</sup> Our control over our audio and audio-visual entertainment at the touch of any of a proliferation of buttons for functions beyond the simplest binary of ‘power on/off’ has extended our *potential*, if not our actual, choice of media consumption configurations – depending on our competence and desire to handle the technology, as well as on our access to the channels of distribution of the relevant media, as determined by content or service providers. Yet, in navigating between channels, tracks or pages nowadays, we manipulate a polysemic flow – a dispersion, or *Zerstreuung* – of entertainment sources, none of which are allowed to sustain our attention for long enough to bring about concentration, but all of which succeed in entering our awareness.

Dialectical understanding of Benjamin’s *Zerstreuung* as proposed by Eiland (p. 57) presupposes the interoperability of this signification of distraction with other concepts; our perceptions of *Zerstreuung* must evolve rather than be modelled on a fixed definition. Distraction, more than the individual German signifiers, enables this interoperation. Only when alternatives to the signifier *Zerstreuung* are possible, and only when it is placed in dialogue with other alignments of awareness or attention – not just a grouping of terms that fall under the heading of concentration – can the multiple dimensions and dynamics of distraction be properly investigated. The official English translation of Benjamin’s ‘Kunstwerk’ essay is not helpful in this regard: in the latter sections of the German version, one key observation about ‘Ablenkung’ immediately precedes three series of remarks pertaining to ‘Zerstreuung’; but all of these have been rendered in the translation as ‘distraction’, without regard for Benjamin’s terminological distinction. Let us now turn to Benjamin’s essay, which demonstrates how all of these remarks are associated with other problematical terms, which I have distinguished in bold type below:

i) ‘Der **Versenkung**, die in der Entartung des Bürgertums eine Schule asozialen Verhaltens wurde, tritt die **Ablenkung** als eine Spielart sozialen Verhaltens gegenüber.’ (p. 379)

ii) (Given that the masses seek ‘Zerstreuung’ in a work of art whereas the lover of art collects his thoughts before it): ‘**Zerstreuung** und **Sammlung** [the opposite of ‘Zerstreuung’, where the act of contemplation gathers together thoughts rather than allowing them to become dispersed] stehen in einem Gegensatz, der folgende

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<sup>73</sup> Not to mention such innovations as tools for composing, recording, mixing, editing, playlisting, presenting and uploading content, until recently the preserve of studio specialists, that are becoming readily (and sometimes freely) available online to consumers-as-producers.

Formulierung erlaubt: Der vor dem Kunstwerk sich **Sammelnde** versenkt sich darein [. . .]. Dagegen **versenkt** die **zerstreute** Masse ihrerseits das Kunstwerk in sich'. (p. 380)

iii) 'Gewöhnen kann sich auch der **Zerstreute**. Mehr: gewisse Aufgaben in der **Zerstreuung** bewältigen zu können, erweist erst, daß sie zu lösen einem zur Gewohnheit geworden ist' (p. 381); and, as a result,

iv) '*Die **Rezeption** in der **Zerstreuung**, die sich mit wachsendem Nachdruck auf allen Gebieten der Kunst bemerkbar macht und das Symptom von tiefgreifenden Veränderungen der Apperzeption ist, hat am Film ihr eigentliches Übungsinstrument*' (p. 381).

These remarks are connected by the sense of *Versenkung* – or immersion – that occurs in contemplation, in diversion and where dispersed perceptions become habitual, such as when the cinemagoer takes in a range of scenes in a continuous showing. As I shall now demonstrate, *Versenkung* distinguishes Benjamin's understanding of *Zerstreuung* from *Ablenkung*; and *Zerstreuung* shares with 'distraction' only a problematical ambiguity, not least for English translators.

In the first remark cited above, Benjamin opposes not *Zerstreuung* but *Ablenkung*, with its connotations of deviation and disconnection, to *Versenkung*: his prime example is of Dadaism, 'eine recht vehemente Ablenkung' in its subversive treatment of works of art as vehicles for 'Skandals' (p. 379) rather than as sites for bourgeois contemplation. *Ablenkung* amounts to sudden, sharp shock: an 'ablenkendes Element' also came to prominence in the ever-shifting settings and focus in early cinema, still a novelty for Benjamin, 'welche stoßweise auf den Beschauer eindringen' (ibid.). By contrast, the persistent nature of *Versenkung* is also to be found in the perpetual reconfiguration of *Zerstreuung*. In his fragmentary notes for a '*Theorie der Zerstreuung*', which he was never to complete, produced alongside the second version of the 'Kunstwerk' essay, Benjamin signals his strong intention to investigate 'das Verhältnis der Zerstreuung zur Einverleibung'; he does not use the term *Versenkung* here at all.<sup>74</sup> *Einverleibung* is commonly translated as 'assimilation', which is not usually coterminous with any markedly contemplative element of 'immersion', although both *Versenkung* and *Einverleibung* convey a sense of 'absorption'. The official translation of Benjamin's notes uses this latter, ambiguous term,<sup>75</sup> reflecting the way in which Benjamin himself takes for granted the

<sup>74</sup> Benjamin, 'Theorie der Zerstreuung' (c.1935-1936), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 7, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989, pp. 678-679.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings, eds., *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Volume 3 (1935-38)*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 141.

interplay of both distinctions and connections between spectators' levels of engagement with works of art, which we can discern from the last three of his four remarks cited above.

In Benjamin's second remark, *Versenkung* is a component of the opposing processes of *Sammlung* and *Zerstreuung*, albeit in contrasting directions: *Zerstreuung* cannot therefore be contrasted with *Versenkung* as clearly as *Ablenkung* can. *Sammlung* and *Zerstreuung* alike can result, as Benjamin's third remark specifies, in the formation of habitual behaviour assimilated from the context in which the spectator is absorbed: 'Gewohnheit', Benjamin's chosen term in the essay, resonates with 'Einverleibung' in his notes, as well as with Kant's distinction of *absentia* from *abstractio*.

In the *Zerstreuung* of film, unlike either the *Versenkung* relating to a personal thought or the *Sammlung* of traditional high art, however, habitual behaviour is conditioned and modulated to a much greater extent by the work of art. Whereas *Sammlung* attunes the individual spectator's mind to developing an interpretation that he is subsequently responsible for disseminating, Benjamin's fourth remark in the essay contextualises the habit-formation of *Zerstreuung* as the cinemagoers' pre-conditioned response en masse to interpretations that evolve on screen. Benjamin's essay bears witness to the revolutionary *Ablenkung* of the Dadaists – to a movement, in one sense of the term, being usurped barely a generation later by another kind of movement, the moving image, which creates and disseminates its own 'Schockwirkung' (p. 381). The shock has been moderated by its dispersal across this new form of art, as well as by the 'Einverleibung' of its viewers, who assimilate and absorb content that is responding to them all the time that their '*Rezeption in der Zerstreuung*' limits their response to it.

Taking stock of my historical analysis of *Zerstreuung* so far, I am mindful of its dilating terms of reference, taking in "texts" in the broadest sense, from philosophy via psychology to the visual arts. This investigation could proceed much further at or between any of the staging posts that have already marked its course. Chronologically, however, certain developments of the last sixty years or so encourage us to backtrack and draw protracted, although relatively straight lines connecting the insights we have gained from earlier manifestations of distraction. Benjamin's '*Rezeption in der Zerstreuung*' remains resonant at an interdisciplinary level because it acknowledges the absorption of multiple modes of "reading" in media consumption: visual literacy, familiarity with technological devices and acquaintance with long-established fabula transferred to a narrative form that is also



canonical all no longer shock or lead the “reader” astray. Already in Benjamin’s dialectical space of *Zerstreuung* and *Versenkung*, for example, William James’s separate spheres of the passive intellectual mode of attention that acknowledges inattentiveness and of the *Zerstreuung* that is opposed to attention in general loom large: and James’s contrast needs to be reaffirmed if Benjamin’s juxtaposed dialectics are to be unravelled. In James’s terms, Benjamin’s *Versenkung* belongs to passive intellectual attention; it is not an active form of attention, as awareness comes over rather than attention being activated in an operation of attending to something. Passive intellectual attention, as we have established, embraces *Unaufmerksamkeit*: attention to all but the object of contemplation is displaced or absent, so dispersal of thoughts – or *Zerstreuung* – is suspended. However, Benjamin’s sense of *Zerstreuung* is remote from the unsettled, scatterbrained mode of *Zerstreuung* proposed by James, as it is a component rather than an opponent of attention. I would venture to situate Benjamin’s *Zerstreuung* as a variant form of passive intellectual attention in the context of reception, where the receiver is attuned and accustomed to being bombarded with attention-capturing devices dispersed across the film or text.

### ***Unruhe*: Determining and Perpetuating Distraction**

I do not intend to lose sight of my prime concern with distraction in novelistic and autobiographical writing as my project expands. My concern is strengthened, not weakened, by the circumstances of displacement in which this endeavour has had to be developed. The woefully contracting accommodation in British modern languages of literary studies that are profitably *supported*, rather than supplanted, by film studies amongst other modes of creative and critical thinking threatens to render my undertaking less vital than I am striving to prove it to be. Literary modelling requires historico-cultural and philosophical underpinnings, and for distraction these are large and broad enough to entail a study of their own. These foundation stones also ensure that presentations of distraction as an idiosyncratic operation are validated, enabling the study to refer illustratively and incisively to apposite passages of literature that stand the best chance of appealing and enduring within market-driven university curricula when they are packaged as emblematic of a fundamental, rather than abstruse phenomenon, which distraction represents. Popular books – more popular, that is, outside German-speaking countries than the acclaimed and canonical works of, for instance, Kafka, Handke and Frisch – are often labelled ‘page-turners’ by readers and critics, with or without negative connotations.

In German, the equivalent term, *Spannende Bücher*, is proudly displayed in catalogue sections and conspicuously above shelves in bookshops. The English and German terms alike encapsulate the restless state in which sustained contact with textual narration is most likely to be accomplished in the multi-media age. *Spannung* and – crucially – *Unruhe* may not saturate literary narrative beyond the blockbusters, but they feature episodically, and need to be promoted for their effects that are unparalleled in other media. Tension or *Spannung* is variously a cause and a symptom of distraction; *Unruhe* is the remaining common but slightly less obvious translation of distraction, and the missing link between the *verstört*, *zerstreut* and *unaufmerksam* modes that I have outlined so far.

Restlessness engenders narration and meta-narration. Diary or notebook entries are scribbled furiously and reworked into a more public and polished form – if time, health and means of support allow. Once authors have died (typically), their most supportive but restless readers and scholars do not settle for the editorially sanctioned published versions alone, but seek to access archives of *Nachlässe* and as many supporting documents as can be mustered. Restlessness also affects the subject-matter of the literary text, beyond being thematised in itself: autobiography, infamously, is considered incomplete until the writer has narrated his own death; but in (ostensible) works of fiction, too, authors such as Bernhard, Genazino and Max Frisch<sup>76</sup> who deal with other modes of distraction have relentlessly prolonged their mining of the same, rich seams. For Genazino in particular, the minutiae of the most ordinary everyday lives repeatedly attract and then distract narration. His protagonists are unsettled by the same elemental sensations: shame, discarded objects, passers-by and misread signs, and neither they nor the narrative they engender will rest easy until they have drawn some conclusion from these signals that feeds back into the banality of the moment of encounter. Significantly, Genazino counts among his influences the Portuguese author Fernando Pessoa's *Das Buch der Unruhe*.<sup>77</sup> True to form, a single, succinct but deceptive metaphor from this work – 'Ich weiß von nichts, wie diese Dächer' – suffices for Genazino to seek, gain and disseminate insight in a single-page commentary in *Achtung Baustelle* that reverberates through his own oeuvre.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> One of Frisch's "specialities" in his novels is the *Zerstreuung* of his protagonists' self-identity and social identity as distractions from each other.

<sup>77</sup> Originally *Livro do Desassossego*, first published posthumously in 1982, 47 years after Pessoa's death; four English translations of *The Book of Disquiet[ude]* appeared in 1991.

<sup>78</sup> Genazino, *Achtung Baustelle*, p. 23. This piece nestles between a commentary on a remark from Walter Benjamin's *Moskauer Tagebuch* – "Ich lese auf meinem Zimmer Proust, fresse dazu Marzipan" (pp. 21-3) – and Wolfgang Hildesheimer's reworking of Mozart's *Requiem* – "Herr, gib ihnen die ewige Ruhe nicht." (pp. 24-25). It is not only this fashioning of *Unruhe* that marks Hildesheimer [1916-91] out for inclusion in my projected survey of authors of distraction. His early short story 'Der Urlaub', in *Lieblose Legende* (Frankfurt

This insight relates to the distinction between memory – which Genazino’s protagonists tend to release from attic-like stores<sup>79</sup> and to disperse fairly voluntarily among the distractions that punctuate their negotiations with their daily routines – and intellect, which does not usually concern them. Genazino’s interpretation of Pessoa’s metaphor reflects the pointlessness conveyed by so many of his protagonists and third-person narrators of conflating memory with understanding or knowledge:

Ich brauchte nur wenig nachdenken, und es fielen mir immer mehr Geschichten und Details von Menschen ein, die zwar gebildet sind, ihre Bildung aber nicht oder nicht ausreichend genug nutzen können; das Wissen erscheint ihnen, weil es lebenspraktisch oft ohne Wert bleibt, wie eine andere Form des Nichtwissens. Und plötzlich sah ich ein, daß die Metapher von Fernando Pessoa punktgenau trifft: Die Dächer wissen zwar alles, aber sie (beziehungsweise wir) haben nichts davon. (Ibid.)

Genazino implies here that displaying ‘Wissen’ for its own sake is, for many, immaterial: the contributions they seek to make to the world are, rather, ‘lebenspraktisch’. Surveying Genazino’s oeuvre, we find that a balance between creative, entertaining practice in the novels and epistemological reflection in the essays has been struck: he attends to narratorial interpretation in his non-fiction, leaving his characters to attend to their dispersed perceptions in his creative works.

Writing which, like other forms of knowledge transfer, is promulgated for the sake of ‘Wissen’, or in other words for settling on an interpretation, should not distract us from literature that mirrors or projects the inconclusive diversions of life in general. An attraction of Kant’s and Benjamin’s theories that endures despite their anchoring in ever more historical contexts, is in their distraction from our experiences of *Zerstreuung* today. Characterising ‘Der Geist der Unruhe’ in 1930, the literary critic Hermann Kesten observes dual operations of restless distraction-seeking in these two modes of writing and reading. His words remain poignant today; they provide a fitting conclusion to my tracing of a constellation of points of distraction in a larger cosmos that the scholar strives to prospect, observe and chart, but within which the *Geist* of the reader never fails to be distracted by alluring novelties:

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am Main: Suhrkamp, 1962 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1952], pp. 128-136) is an archetypal portrayal of a well-intentioned protagonist (named, not untypically for Hildesheimer’s figures, Adrian) who is beset by multiple, conflicting forms of distraction at inopportune moments – including, crucially, being overcome by drowsiness and missing the last opportunity to be carried by locomotion to his ultimate destination. I am working on a commentary on this tale for inclusion at the heart of my extended project.

<sup>79</sup> The ambiguity of ‘Dächer’ in German, conveying roofs seen externally as well as attics defined from within, is overlooked by Genazino, who fashions a word play with ‘*Gedächtnis*; denn unterhalb der Ziegel und Dachlatten befinden sich bekanntlich Speicher, in denen aufbewahrt wird, was nicht verlorengehen soll’.

Die Stellung der Literatur war immer zweifelhaft in der Welt [. . .]. Um so zweifelhafter wurde sie in einer Welt, die sich selber bis zur Irrealität zweifelhaft wurde. In einem Leben voller Unruhe und Angst vor dem Leben, das in der Kultur vor allem das Unbehagen spürt, hinter allen Gesetzen die Willkür sieht, das die Wirtschaft moralisch und rationell zu machen, Ratio und Moral zu industrialisieren, ja zu verwirtschaften sucht; in einem Leben, dessen Sinn nicht nur einigen denkenden Individuen, sondern auch den Massen verloren ging, dessen Philosophen die Wahrheit nur eine von vielen Wahrscheinlichkeiten heißen und in der Existenz den ganzen Sinn der Existenz sehen, in einem solchen gefährlichen und bitteren Leben verwechselt Mann zu leicht den Apparat des Geistes mit dem Geist des Lebens. [. . .] In Deutschland wagen es gar die Theoretiker unter den Literaten, die vom Worte lebenden Kritiker, den Literaten vorzuwerfen, sie seien Literaten und hätten Vernunft, oder wie man das neuerdings heißt, sie seien "Intellektuelle". Diese Vokabel gilt als ein Schimpf. Intellektuelle machen Jagd auf Intellektuelle. [. . . Der] Geist der Unruhe und der Neuerungssucht, diesem vielgeschmähten und revolutionären Geiste, ist keine Grenze gesetzt.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Kesten, 'Der Geist der Unruhe', in *Der Geist der Unruhe: Literarische Streifzüge*. Cologne: Kiepenhauer & Witsch, 1959, pp. 15-17. Although its allusions to distinctions between the treatments of literature in France and Germany are not blatant, this essay occupies a useful place in comparative literature as it was originally the 'Nachwort' to *Neue Französische Erzähler* (Berlin: Kiepenhauer, 1930).